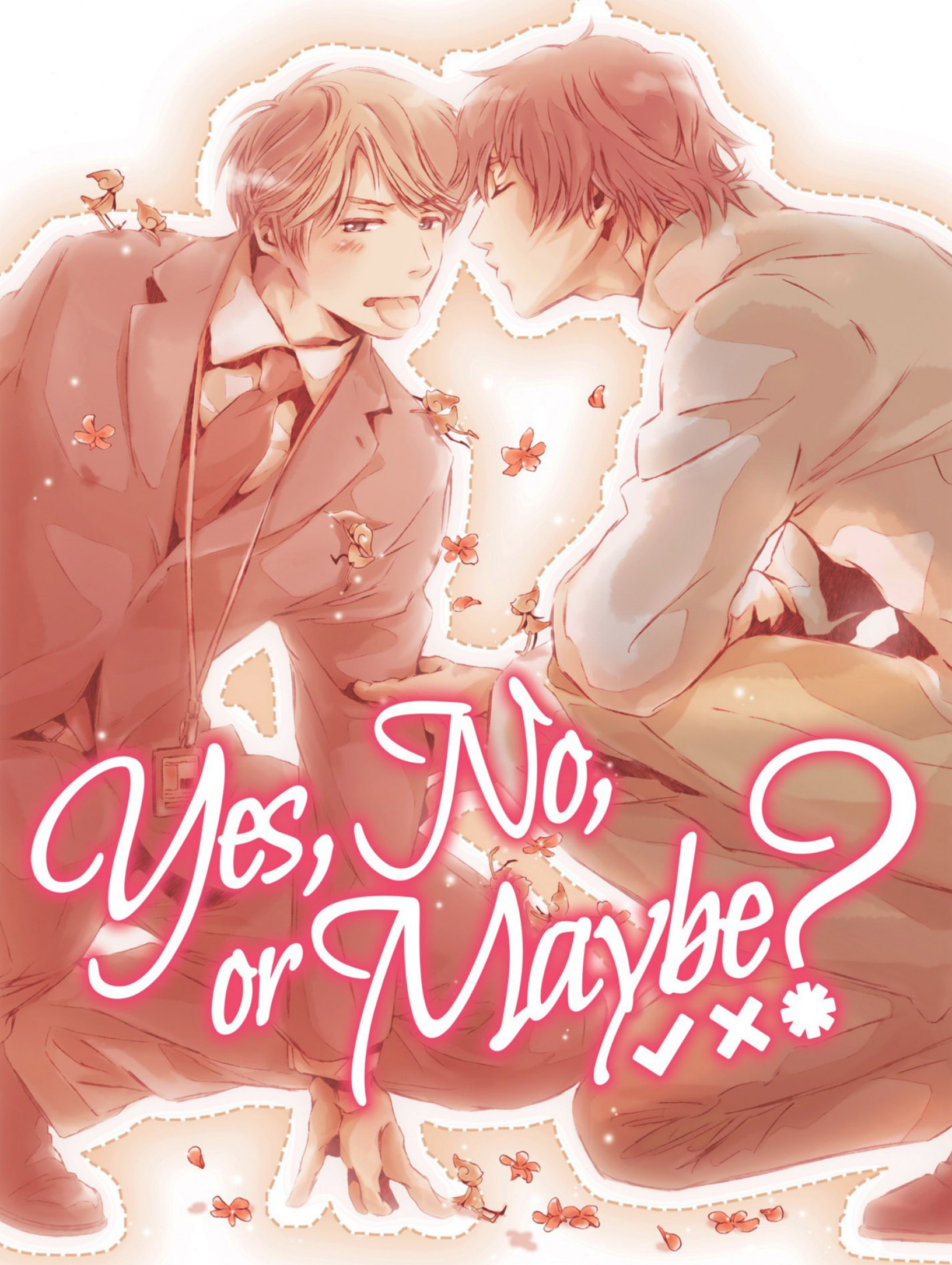




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Lala Takemiya

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A Hypothetical Thought Exercise

Yes, No, or Maybe? ✓✕*

STORY BY

Michi Ichiho

ILLUSTRATED BY

Lala Takemiya



Seven Seas Entertainment

YES, NO, OR MAYBE?

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YES, NO, OR MAYBE?

IN JAPANESE TV RATINGS, 1 percent equals approximately 408,000 viewers, or 180,000 households. My news program has an average rating of 12 percent. Multiply 408,000 by 12, and we're somewhere in the ballpark of 4.9 million viewers on average—and that's just the Kanto region. Add in the rest of Japan, and, well... Long story short, there are currently several Tokyo Domes' worth of people looking at me, Kunieda Kei, and my winning smile. Obviously those numbers fluctuate on any given day, but hey, I'm allowed to feel good about myself.

"This has been *The Evening File*. Have a good night, and we'll see you tomorrow."

As I gave my signature signoff, I looked directly into camera 2 and did my usual half nod, half bow, bringing the nearly two-hour program to a close.

"That's a wrap!"

All around me, the studio came to life in almost perfect unison, but I didn't bat an eye. Then the assistant director ran over and bowed deeply in apology.

"I'm so sorry, Kunieda-san! There was a page missing from the manuscript for the second half of the breaking news segment!"

"That's all right," I said quickly. "I was able to work around it while we were live. But it *did* kind of throw me for a minute there—did my voice crack?"

"No, not at all!"

"That's good."

Then the floor director walked over, looking deathly pale. "Wait... He didn't have the full script?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, um... After he gave it a quick readthrough, I had the studio print him a fresh copy while he was getting his makeup touched up. But while they were on the way here, one of the pages slipped out of the stack, and they didn't notice until right before the segment started..."

"You should've checked it before you handed it to him, you moron!"

"I'm sorry!"

“It’s all right, honestly. No harm done,” I insisted, smoothing things over with an awkward smile. “Just try to be more careful next time.”

“Kunieda-kun, how on earth did you work around that giant hole in the script?”

“Well, I memorized it during the initial readthrough, so I simply recited it from memory.”

“You’re joking! What are you, a genius?!”

“No, no. Anyone could memorize a single page.”

Each script was printed out in giant two-inch letters for readability, so any given page was only about fifty words total, if that.

“Okay, but still, I don’t know how you managed to recite all four of the missing news stories with such flawless accuracy! You’re incredible!”

“I got lucky, I suppose,” I replied modestly.

Meanwhile, in my head, I was thinking: *Cram it, you ignorant plebeians! Setting aside the incomplete script, surely one of these idiots must’ve gone looking for the missing page at some point, right? You’d think the goddamn floor director would have noticed that something was up—and yet you want to point the finger at this guy? Stone, meet glass house! And another thing? The cameras started rolling way too early! That camera assistant’s a total clod. Plus, the assistant director put the teleprompter in the worst possible spot... Is this whole studio brain-dead?!*

I didn’t breathe a word of this out loud, of course. My smile was more airtight than a vacuum-sealed Tupperware container. Instead, with a polite, “Great work today, everyone,” I headed out of the studio.

Unfortunately, my director chased after me. “Kunieda!”

Ugh, go away. What do you want now?

“How can I help you?” I asked, turning back with a pleasant smile. He handed me a stack of papers stapled together in the upper left corner.

“Here’s your script and the other materials for tomorrow’s filming trip. Sorry it’s late.”

You should be sorry! Why do you always wait until the last minute to get this shit to me? I don't have time to wait around for you forever, you stupid pleb!
“This is for the behind-the-scenes with the animator, right?”

“Yep, that’s the one! He’s making a new animated title sequence for *The News*. Not sure why *we’re* being asked to cover it, but whatever.”

“They’re really going all out with this overhaul, aren’t they?”

“I just wish they’d spare even half that budget for the evening timeslot... Anyway, we’ll be leaving here at ten and returning around two. That’ll get you back in time for the show, right?”

“Right.”

“I’ve visited the place a few times already. Real nice guy, that animator. Very down to earth.”

“Glad to hear it.” *I don’t trust your judgment as far as I can throw it.*

“Don’t worry. Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll get along with him just fine.”

I hate to break it to you, but everyone I meet is either incompetent, obnoxious, or beneath my notice.

“Anyway, good work out there today. See you tomorrow!”

“Have a good night.”

On my way back to the newsroom, I paused to examine a poster taped up on the hallway wall. It was an ordinary bust shot of a man, paired with the logo for *The News*, with the tagline: *Reinventing Nightly News With Asou Keiichi*. Overall, the poster’s simple, no-frills design suggested unwavering confidence in its claims.

Beside it was a poster for *The Evening File*. In contrast with the dignified design of the first, this one was much more casual—a reflection of the show’s overarching theme of “quick news updates over a cup of tea.” Photos of the anchors were depicted together in a collage, myself included. These photos were taken at the start of the new year to gear up for the overhaul starting this spring, and my smile was *flawless*. Yes, I was easily the most photogenic of the bunch. Not even my female costars could hold a candle to my perfection.

“Whatcha looking at?”

A female anchor, two years senior to me, caught me admiring my own image and walked over.

“Oh, hello there,” I replied affably, suppressing the spark of annoyance that flared up as she interrupted my train of thought. “This is my first time getting to see the new posters, that’s all.”

“Ooh, I see. Great photo, Kunieda-kun! The perfect prince, as usual.”

And as for you, I hear you turned into a total party girl after the morning timeslot dropped you like yesterday’s news. Maybe you should think about turning it down a notch now that you’re almost thirty. Just a little friendly advice.

“No, no, I wasn’t looking at me. I was looking at Asou-san. He’s so photogenic.” I smiled bashfully to play up the “young rookie admiring the veteran” angle.

“Yeah. I hear they’re gonna put these up in all the stations and trains.”

“Seems like management’s pulling out all the stops.”

“Well, a lot’s riding on this overhaul, you know. And it seems to be working. These days we’re starting to break 13 percent.”

The higher-ups were angling to “reinvent” the station (and cut costs, naturally) by dropping all the big-name veteran MCs and brainless bimbo assistants in favor of putting the spotlight entirely on the news anchors. Personally, I didn’t really see the point in them going out of their way to advertise it during the evening timeslots, but then again, I didn’t have the numbers.

“You know, with talent like yours, you might just get a poster of your own one of these days.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

That was the honest truth. To me, being a headliner sounded exhausting. As a run-of-the-mill news anchor, it didn’t matter whether I was on set or hiding out in the newsroom, fiddling around on my phone—as long as I showed up to

work, I got paid. Plus, I still got enough screen time to keep my ego happy. In that sense, I was perfectly content with my role as anchor and co-host on the evening timeslot.

I had achieved the perfect balance: the exceptional good looks and flawless diction of a skilled pro, and yet when it came to prerecorded segments, I could still crack jokes and drop one-liners with the best of them. Above all, my reputation was that of a responsible, competent, princely young man...and I planned to keep it that way for a long time to come.

“Say, Kunieda-kun?” Her voice took on a hint of obsequious flattery.

“Yes?” I replied, guarded.

“Listen, um... Me and my friends are going out drinking together; would you wanna come? There’s this one girl who’d really love to meet you—”

I had a feeling something like this was coming, and frankly, it made me want to roll my eyes into the back of my skull. An older anchor past her prime trying to put her mark on a new up-and-comer? *Barf*.

“I’m sorry, but...” I selected the *hesitation* and *guilt* masks from my collection of outward personas and fused them together. “There’s this girl back home in Shizuoka, and...”

“Oh, you have a girlfriend?”

“Well, not exactly, but...” I added a dash of embarrassment.

Technically, I wasn’t lying—this chick simply took what I said and read into it, that’s all.

“Don’t worry. I understand completely.”

“Sorry... Oh, but please don’t tell anyone! It’s a secret!”

“Hmmm... Not sure I can promise that...”

“C’mon, please? I’m serious!”

“Fine, fine! But you still have to come drinking with us one of these days. Just drinks, I promise.”

Hah! The dumbass fell for it!

All I had to do was make it feel like “our little secret” and suddenly any disappointment or annoyance she felt toward me was replaced with an irresistible sense of superiority. Knowing her, she wouldn’t actually blab, but would happily lord it over the heads of other women, like: “Oh, Kunieda-kun? Yeahhh, about that... I don’t have all the details, and he’s asked me not to spread it around, but... I wouldn’t, if I were you. Sorry, hon.”

Piece of cake. These plebs are all so simple.

I left the station around eight. Naturally, I made sure to offer the guard a friendly “See you tomorrow!” on my way out. Yes, I built this image campaign from the ground up.

But the second I walked into my apartment and locked the door behind me... that was what marked the start of my off-hours.

First things first, I let out a long sigh, the likes of which I would never replicate in public. Then I washed my face in the sink, and when I was done, I looked at my reflection in the mirror. My perfect smile was gone, replaced with a steely blank stare, almost like my face was refusing to exercise a single muscle.

Next, I ran a hand through my perfectly styled hair and ruffled it up, then loosened my tie. Piece by piece, I stripped off my suit and tossed it over the back of the couch. Then I changed into my favorite loungewear: an old tracksuit (jacket *and* pants) my mother bought for me years ago on the second floor of a department store. At this point it was practically falling apart, but as long as I wore a coat over it, no one would notice the holes in the elbows.

And by “coat,” I’m not talking about my designer Aquascutum trench coat, either—I’m talking about a pilly off-brand duffle coat I bought online. Anything that I didn’t want to associate with “Kunieda Kei, the news anchor,” I had shipped to my house directly. Cheap instant foods, collector’s editions of my favorite manga, you name it.

I slid on a pair of thick, black-rimmed fake glasses and a surgical mask to cover everything from my nose down (to protect my throat from infections, among other things). Then I grabbed my worn-out synthetic leather wallet, stuffed it in my pocket, and pulled on a pair of grimy old sneakers.

In this getup, no one ever afforded me more than a passing glance...and it was such a relief. Some people would call this their “lazy day outfit,” but not me. Hell, I’d wear this anywhere—Shinjuku, Shibuya, Roppongi, fashion be damned. It was so much easier to exist in the outside world not as a “guy from TV” but as a bland nobody.

Every night, I spent exactly thirty minutes of my daily schedule enjoying a nighttime stroll in this disguise. No chance of anyone flagging me down. No paparazzi shots posted to Twitter. No stupid, pointless messages sent through my show’s contact form just to say “I saw so-and-so walking down the street yesterday, and I wanted to say hi, but I got too scared, LOL!”

Seriously, my job is so bizarre. I go on TV and occasionally get the (D-list) celebrity treatment, but other than that, I’m no different from any other white-collar worker. I make the same amount of money no matter how popular I am. Of course, this is a double-edged sword—it means I’ll never directly profit off of any star power I generate, either. (Quite a few people have left the biz to go freelance for this exact reason, but I digress.)

But the most important difference between a news anchor and a TV star is that we don’t have any managers (or agents or what have you) to shield us from bad press. We’re not allowed to be “arrogant” or “troublemakers”—the industry won’t allow it. I’m not even talking about capital-C crimes; if you commit even the smallest act of impropriety...well, it won’t ruin your life, but it’ll certainly haunt you for as long as you appear on TV. And don’t think you can play it off as a joke, either; only a respected veteran can get away with that.

To be fair, though, our job is to sit there and read the news to the camera, so I could understand how the station might want us to avoid provoking any sort of negative response from the viewers. But me, personally, I wanted the freedom to read trashy magazines I bought from the convenience store, or order a side salad from the deli, or put a grouchy taxi driver in his place. These were all things my “news anchor” persona could never do...but if I had to wear that mask 24/7, I’d probably suffocate to death. So to me, a scant few minutes spent dressed like a loser were worth their weight in gold.

The late January wind was chilly, but I paid it no mind. At the end of my stroll, I usually ended up at my favorite neighborhood izakaya—the one that let me

order food to go. My favorite item on the menu was the beef bowl (with a soft-boiled egg on top); I carried it out in a plastic to-go bag, and as I headed to the convenience store to pick up some beer to accompany it, there was practically a skip in my step.

When I arrived back home, I plopped down cross-legged onto the couch and lifted the lid. Steam rose into my face as the soft-boiled egg jiggled slightly.

“Holy hell, I’m drooling,” I muttered to myself. This was not my perfectly practiced, diligently crafted “television voice,” either. *That’s* how you know I’m in my happy place.

Thinly sliced beef, each piece adorned with fat like a glistening lace hem. Shirataki noodles dyed brown from the marinade. Shapeless, mushy onions. And last but not least, the secret ingredient: finely chopped chicken liver sautéed in garlic. I stabbed my chopsticks into the egg like it killed my parents and gave the whole thing a good stir. Then, at last—paying careful attention to the meat-to-rice ratio—I took my first bite.

“Sho good...!”

I ate this same thing three to four times a week, and yet somehow I never tired of it. Between bites, I took a sip of beer or added another dash of sesame to jazz things up.

At the staff cafeteria, I only ever ordered the “multigrain special” or whatever other new-age healthy crap they had on offer. No matter how deeply my heart yearned for the chicken nanban with tartar sauce, I couldn’t afford to tarnish my carefully sculpted image. So for me, dinnertime was always pure bliss.

With a satisfied sigh, I cleaned up my trash and made myself a cup of after-dinner coffee. Nothing fancy, just instant. I couldn’t be assed to do the dishes, so I used a paper cup instead.

Technically speaking, I had assigned my news anchor persona a favorite coffee blend, as well as a favorite tea blend, a favorite shampoo, a favorite furniture brand, and so on. And I hadn’t chosen them at random, either. These little details were crucial props, instrumental in expressing the sort of taste I wanted people to think I had. Besides, I was pretty sure normal (as in non-celebrity) people did this sort of thing to some degree or another.

Sipping my coffee, I picked up the remote...but just then, my phone started to ring. Not the one I used for work, either—my personal phone that only my family knew about.

“Hello?”

“Kei? Have you been getting enough to eat lately?” asked my mother. “One of the neighbors brought us a box of tangerines, so I was thinking of sending you some. Anything else you need?”

“Cup noodles,” I answered without missing a beat. “And I want a bigger variety of flavors this time. Oh, and potato chips. And canned stuff, like chicken and corned beef. Oh, and could you send me my complete collection of *Dragon Ball* manga I left on the shelf? I wanna reread it.”

“I can’t fit all that in a single box! And good lord, your eating habits are terrible!”

“Like I told you, I eat healthy stuff when I’m at work.”

“At work. Right,” she muttered, then let out a big, exaggerated sigh. “You know, I see your little façade on TV every single day. At first it used to make me laugh, but now? It just makes me sick.”

“Wow. Thanks a lot, Mom.”

“I’m serious, Kei! I don’t know how you keep up the act. To think that lazy little glutton I raised would one day be a newscaster... I mean, you always knew how to behave in public, but every time the neighbors gush about you, I always feel like such a fraud...”

“Oh, shut the hell up! And don’t go running your mouth about me to *anyone*, got it?! You’ll ruin my career!”

“Yes, yes, I know... Now tell me, what are your plans for the future? With a personality like yours, is there any woman in the world who could possibly agree to marry you?”

Of course not.

I’d made some attempts in the past—short-lived relationships with women I saw only as accessories to my “perfect” self. But these efforts inevitably ate up

all my precious free time, which meant they quickly became exhausting to maintain. Then I'd have to spend even *more* effort making a clean break without looking like the bad guy. Rinse and repeat.

"Mind your own business, Mom. Anyway, I've got things to do. Have a good night."

"Kei, wait—"

Without waiting for a goodbye, I hung up the phone and hit play on my recording of tonight's news. Again and again, I reviewed all the sections where I was onscreen—checking my articulation, my intonation, my pacing. If I stared *too* directly into the camera, it would come off as unsettling—can't have that. How was my chemistry with my costars? What about my posture? My wardrobe? My mental checklist was miles long.

Ugh, I knew the little stripes on my shirt would look like an optical illusion on camera! That wardrobe stylist promised me it would be fine, too! What an imbecile!

Once I finished reviewing my performance, it was time to watch the news programs from the other TV stations—all of them—played back at 3x speed. If anything caught my eye, good or bad, I would rewind and play the segment at normal speed. And yes, I did this for morning, afternoon, evening, *and* night timeslots, which is why I had four separate DVRs in my entertainment center.

Of course, I could always get these recordings from the staff room at the station, but knowing me, I'd inevitably start complaining aloud: "That looks stupid. Should've cut that. The timing on that commercial break was totally off." Besides, I couldn't let them see exactly how much effort I put into my performance or it would damage my rep. *Some* effort was okay, but for the most part, I wanted them to think it all came naturally to me.

I paid extra close attention to the shows we were in direct competition with. Then I'd check the graphs to see where we came out on top and where we lost ground. The numbers didn't always correlate to the quality of a given broadcast, *per se*, but there were days when you could clearly tell why the viewers were changing the channel.

Hunched over like a gremlin with my notepad in my lap, I scribbled notes

furiously. I'd feel a twinge of hip pain every thirty minutes or so, reminding me to pause and stretch—then I was right back to it. While this definitely wasn't a side of me I wanted other people to see...if I were to name my strongest talent, I think the unending drive to perfect myself would be it.

By the time I finished watching all the news, it was nearly two in the morning (and yet, by the time tomorrow rolled around, I knew I'd inevitably somehow forget everything I'd seen). *Time to get ready for that filming trip tomorrow.* I took a quick shower, then returned to the living room and started flipping through the papers I got from the director.

“Tsuzuki Ushio, 27.” *Huh. Same age as me.* “While attending a vocational school, his original stop-motion animation—a short film depicting the life cycle of a baby bird—went viral and reached more than 10 million views online. Since then, he has received multiple international awards. Currently he works on commercials.”

Hmmm.

Generally speaking, I hated anyone who managed to get farther in life within the same time frame as me, so my enthusiasm was admittedly rather muted as I popped the reference DVD into the player.

What played was a video featuring the sort of clay figurines I remembered seeing in educational programs from my childhood. Flowers bloomed, the sun set, rain fell...all conveyed through the squishing and stretching of clay. This was actually the first in a series of videos contained on this DVD, all of them about five minutes in length. Some of them were created not with clay, but origami or plush toys.

Man, I'd hate to be this guy, I thought to myself. Stop-motion animation required *thousands* of minute changes, millimeter by millimeter, all strung together to create the illusion of fluid movement. Talk about torture. If it were me, I'd get fed up and smash it all into pieces before I took enough shots to compose even a single second of footage. Any dude who had the time or patience to painstakingly create something *five minutes long* was bound to be the most miserable nerd on the planet.

Conveniently, right as I started to take a somewhat mean-spirited interest in

the creator, the next video in the series featured the man himself. Clearly he was at some sort of formal award ceremony; I took one look at him, standing uncomfortably in his tuxedo, and groaned under my breath. *Accomplished and attractive? Screw this guy.*

He really didn't look like the kind of guy who would dedicate countless hours of his life to pointless busywork. He was tall enough to fit in with a crowd of white people, he had a well-defined nose... Put simply, he was handsome. In isolation, his individual features were striking, and yet, strangely enough, they didn't clash with each other. He struck me as the kind of guy who'd look more at home with a chisel or mallet, chipping away at a large, ostentatious statue. Not some dorky little animation.

And yet the glitz and glamor of the ceremony didn't seem to go to his head. Instead, he held his gold trophy like it was an afterthought and shifted his neck stiffly. Maybe his bow tie was too tight.

"We'd like to congratulate you on your award."

They offered him the mic, but he simply nodded in response.

"Can you tell us how you feel?"

"I'm not much of a party person, so I feel like going home, having dinner, and going to bed."

"Oh... Well, um... Pretty hefty trophy, don't you think?"

"Yeah. My grandma loves precious metals, so I'm sure she'll be excited."

"What's the matter with this guy...?" I muttered to myself.

He wasn't just acting quirky for the camera, either. No, he sincerely wanted to go home and didn't care one whit about the trophy. As someone who maintained an act at all times, I had a keen eye for this sort of thing—and I wanted nothing more than to reach through the screen, grab him by the collar, and shout, "Smile, damn it! Pretend you're embarrassed! Make some awkward attempt at expressing your joy and gratitude! Are you Japanese or not?! This reporter's just trying to do their job! Like it or not, you have to follow the social code—that's how the world works!"

Nothing was guaranteed to irritate me quite like a lone-wolf “eccentric artist” type trying to make a living in a specialized field. Especially one with absolutely no regard for my industry’s pre-established conventions. The thought that I’d have to endure this hell in just a few short hours was enough to crush my spirits, but I didn’t have a choice—it was my job.

I wanted a little more information to work with, so I turned on my computer and looked up the guy’s Wikipedia page. Obviously any information I found online wasn’t necessarily going to be 100 percent accurate, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to check. Under the “personal life” section was a line that stated: “Tsuzuki has identified himself as bisexual.”

Ugh. I cringed on reflex. *What if he thinks I’m hot? I’ll have to make sure I’m never alone in a room with him.*

Nothing against alternative lifestyles or whatever—frankly, I couldn’t care less—but I *really* didn’t get why some people had to go and make a big deal of labeling themselves. Especially since you could be discriminated against for that sort of thing. Was it a selling point in his industry or something? Not a fan.

I immediately powered down my computer and got ready for bed. The first thing I did was put on another mask—not the kind I wore outside, but a vapor mask specifically designed to keep my throat hydrated overnight. Then I changed into my pajamas, set the humidifier to full blast, and headed for my room. As I stepped inside, I felt the 60 percent humidity gently engulf my body.

On weeknights I always got precisely four and a half hours of sleep, then in the morning I woke up to my alarm, ate some honey, and spent exactly thirty minutes doing vocal warmups. After that, it was time to read the morning paper over a light meal.

Today’s breakfast was instant miso soup, plus a bowl of rice with bonito flakes and a slice of cheese on top. Dribble a little soy sauce over it, and *bon appétit*. About halfway through, my tongue would usually get bored of the taste; once upon a time, I’d add some kimchi to spice things up, but ever since I landed this job, I’d had to learn to avoid eating anything too astringent. I wolfed my boring breakfast down, etiquette be damned.

Then I got dressed, styled my hair, straightened my tie, and nodded at my

reflection in the mirror. I had now completed my transformation into everyone's favorite Kunieda Kei.

The only question was: could I keep up the act for another day?

I guess we're about to find out.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning..."

Not five seconds after I arrived, the location manager let out a giant yawn. If he, like so many others, thought showing weakness was a way to build a rapport with me, he was utterly mistaken. If anything, it just pissed me off.

"You look tired," I said.

"Yeah, I was up late last night trying to get some editing done, but it didn't go so well..."

Like I give a rat's ass. It's your fault for sucking at your job. If you want a healthy work-life balance, then I recommend you find a career in a different industry.

"Ah, I see. Sounds rough," I replied, my gaze chock-full of sympathy for good measure. Truth be told, I hated people who complained about work while they were on the clock.

"You never really have that problem, huh, Kunieda? Seems like you're always in top form."

"Yes, I'm privileged to have such an excellent team roll out the red carpet for me."

Translation: *Do your job, peasants.* But the location manager didn't know this, of course, so he gave me a sleepy smile.

Wipe that smirk off your face and wake the hell up. Haven't you heard that some people determine your worth based entirely on your smile? You might not be one of them, but I am!

"You're too kind... Anyway, let's get going."

On the drive over, I decided to ask about Tsuzuki Ushio.

“How did he land a job creating a title sequence for the late-night timeslot, anyway? I watched a few of his videos, but they didn’t appear to make any particular social statement. If anything, they mostly seemed like something out of a picture book.”

“Do you know Shitara-san? The producer for *The News*?”

“I know his name, but not much else.”

“He met Tsuzuki-san while he was working on this surrealist kids’ show for a network affiliate. Ever heard of *Midnight Kindergarten*?”

“Oh, yes. The DVDs sold like hotcakes, as I recall.”

“Yeah, totally! Everybody was talking about it, and word spread like wildfire... Heck, even I bought a copy! It was just so *wild*—you can tell none of the higher-ups were supervising this show all that closely. Like when they took those ordinary moms and dressed them up in trashy gyaru makeup to see if the kids could still recognize them...”

“Interesting.” *Don’t care. Get back to my question, please.*

“So anyway, it was around then that Shitara-san first contracted Tsuzuki-san to do a promo for his show. And when he made his big comeback as producer for *The News*, he was like, ‘I’m calling the shots now!’ and immediately brought Tsuzuki-san into the picture without any consultation from anyone else. Or so I heard.”

“I see.” If he was Shitara’s little pet—not that he was *my* producer, but still—I’d better make damn sure I didn’t get on his bad side.

“Anyway... Like I wrote in the shooting schedule, we’ll come and film once or twice a week, then play three or so minutes of footage on *The Evening File* once a night. Then, on the night of the inaugural broadcast of *The News*, we’ll tell the viewers to stay tuned to our channel to see the full finished product at 10 p.m. ...and that’s that.”

“Got it.”

“But yeah, as far as I know, today’s just a meet and greet. Mainly so we can

get an idea of who this Tsuzuki Ushio guy is.”

Then I noticed that the view outside the car window looked awfully familiar... and sure enough, our final destination turned out to be no more than a ten-minute walk from my apartment. It was a neighborhood just on the outskirts of downtown, separated from the high-rise condos by a single large highway. *Ugh, what if we bump into each other on the street?* Not that he’d ever recognize me, of course, given my usual disguise.

I stepped out of the car and immediately came face-to-face with a square wood building. The first floor appeared to have an unusually high ceiling; I could tell from the tall—and firmly shut—roller door.

“I’m told this place used to be a bike shop,” said the director. “Apparently, he rents it for cheap. First floor is his workshop, second floor is his living space.”

“Ah, yes. I can see where the sign used to be.”

“The door’s this way. No need to take your shoes off unless you want to head up to the second floor.”

Passing through the narrow space between Tsuzuki’s house and the one next to it, we walked around to the back, where we discovered a plain aluminum door—the back entrance, evidently—labeled with an equally plain “Tsuzuki” nameplate. Plus a really rusty red mailbox that looked about as old as the building itself.

The assistant director stepped forward and pressed the button on the intercom, but there was no response. “Maybe he’s asleep,” he mused with a wry grin. His second attempt proved fruitful, however; the lock clicked open, and the door opened a fraction.

“Sorry about that,” the man mumbled, blinking his eyes sleepily. Everything about him screamed *just woke up*. Then he let out a big yawn, and instantly I was pissed.

Why do these idiots all think they can slack off? Didn’t anyone tell you what time we planned to get here? You don’t have to serve us tea and biscuits, but at least make yourself presentable, damn it!

“Good morning! Sorry to disturb you,” said the director.

“No, for real, it’s my fault. For some reason I thought this wasn’t happening until tomorrow.”

“What? Don’t be silly! I told you about it on the phone yesterday, remember?”

“Do I have time to wash my face and get dressed?”

“No problem. You do that, and in the meantime we’ll take some footage of the exterior. Kunieda, could you wait inside? Oh, right. This is Kunieda—he’ll be leading the interview. He’s a co-anchor for *The Evening File*.”

“It’s great to meet you. Thanks for having me.” I bowed to him at the exact correct angle for the exact correct time, then flashed my flawless camera smile. Male or female, young or old, it was guaranteed to max out anyone’s affection meter.

“Sure.”

And yet Tsuzuki only afforded me the merest passing glance, his gaze dull with drowsiness. Then he turned to the director standing next to me.

“I thought it was going to be a lady anchor. Isn’t that what you said when we first talked about it?”

“Oh... Well, you see, there was a bit of a scheduling mishap. I apologize; I thought I told you.”

“Meh, it’s no big deal.”

Oh yeah? Then quit complaining about it. Besides, don’t you swing both ways or whatever? You should be grateful you got an Adonis like yours truly! And for that matter, not only are we paying you for your work, but we’re promoting you, too! Show some goddamn gratitude! I thought to myself. All while maintaining my winning smile.

“Sounds like there was some miscommunication. Sorry about that,” I offered courteously. “I promise to give it 110 percent effort.”

“Meh, let’s just get it over with,” Tsuzuki shrugged, brushing me off like I was a speck of dust. “I know you’re just doing your job and all, but I can’t waste too much time talking to the camera. I got a deadline, y’know.”

I proceeded to grab this flippant man by the collar and punch him in the face several times. In my mind, that is.

“Well, uh...you go get ready, and we’ll do a bit of filming out here.”

“Sure.”

Once Tsuzuki turned and walked away, the director drew his lips close to my ear. *Dude, get out of my face.*

“Seems like he’s in a bad mood today. Normally he’s a lot more friendly... Oh well. I trust you’ll be fine, so just do your best to get him to open up to you.”

Easier said than done, buddy! And another thing—why didn’t you people get footage of the exterior during the last few times you were here?! I growled internally.

“Yes, sir,” I replied with a dutiful nod.

Then the rest of the crew filed outside, and Tsuzuki disappeared upstairs, leaving me alone to look around the workshop at my own discretion. The room was filled with an assortment of miniature film sets, some the size of a potted plant, others closer to a garden trough. I recognized some of them from the videos on that DVD. City streets, beaches, forests—all scattered over the dusty gray floor like Lilliputian islands. Against the walls I could see giant studio lights and what I assumed to be backdrop screens, as well as a bicycle. At the opposite end of the room was a computer with a giant 40-inch monitor.

Right as I set my briefcase on the ancient, barely used, synthetic leather couch, I heard Tsuzuki head back down the stairs.

“Is it all right if I set my things here?” I asked.

“Sure.”

Again with the flippant response. As much as it irritated me, it would take a lot more than that to get me to back down.

“Do you do 100 percent of the work yourself?”

“At the rate I get paid, I can’t afford to hire anyone.”

Yeah, no kidding. This animation crap isn’t exactly a viable career. Hell, you’re

lucky you can pay your rent at all... Just goes to show how cushy our country really is.

“Sounds stressful.”

“Nah. I consider myself lucky I can make a living doing what I do. With a job like mine, some people might see it as getting paid to goof off, and they’re not exactly wrong. I’m no different from some 60-year-old retiree building a castle out of toothpicks.”

And here I thought Mr. Artiste was about to preach to me about how his work is “an art form” or something. Glad to see we’re on the same page.

Tsuzuki walked to the computer desk, opened a drawer, and took out several thick stacks of paper bound with string. He brought them over to me. “They told me you’ll need these for the filming.”

“Are those...daily wall calendars?”

You could find them in any store, and often they came with a little proverb on each page. Nothing to write home about.

“Check the back,” he said.

“Huh?”

He handed me a stack, so I took it and turned it over. On the back of each page was a little pencil drawing.

“Oh, I see. Storyboards, right? But why draw them on the back of a calendar?”

“When the local stationery store closed down, they let me have the rest of their stock. See how these calendars are all from two years ago? They were just gonna toss ‘em, but I didn’t want ‘em to go to waste. Plus, the paper’s nice and thin. Super easy to work with.”

“But won’t the ink from the other side show through?”

“Doesn’t matter. They’re just my personal notes. See, when I make a video, I don’t sit down and plan it all out like it’s some big thing. I prefer to be more...*spontaneous*. Like random little doodles on the back of a math test, y’know?”

As I flipped through the pages, I realized that the minute differences between each drawing formed a single continuous motion, like a flipbook. *Man, what a hassle.* “How many would you need to draw to create a single second of animation?”

“Twenty-four frames.”

“Oh, I see. That’s a bit different from our video recordings—we film at thirty frames per second. I suppose a mere fifteen seconds of footage must cost you a whole calendar’s worth of paper.”

“Yep. I’m starting to run out at this point.”

Weird... I was expecting him to be more, you know...snobby? Self-obsessed? But instead, he was actually really humble—perhaps even downright *ascetic*.

Anyone with enough exposure to the limelight was bound to get cocky, no matter the stage. And as I watched those delusional idiots from a safe distance, I could only thank my lucky stars that I was smart enough to keep it hidden. Maybe the simple fact that I had stumbled into this line of work purely by chance was enough to keep me grounded.

Just then, the rest of the team walked in.

“Got all our exterior footage! Oh, hello, Tsuzuki-san. Are you ready for the camera? To start with, we’d like to get some shots of the studio interior.”

“Sure.”

“Feel free to hide anything you’d rather not have broadcasted on television.”

“Nah, no worries.”

It was then that Tsuzuki finally smiled...and with his steely outer façade lowered, he actually seemed like a friendly, sociable guy for once.

Didn’t realize you had it in you, grumpy. It doesn’t cost anything to act polite, so try a little harder, would you?

At first I was relieved, but then I caught myself—what did I have to worry about? It wasn’t *my* problem if he wanted to act like a grouch on national TV. If anything, it would probably win me some sympathy points from the viewers.

“Ack!”

Just then, the assistant director’s tripod snagged on the handle of my briefcase, knocking it over and sending its contents scattering everywhere.

“Dude, watch it!” the cameraman shouted after him.

“Sorry!”

I quietly walked over and helped him pick up my stuff. “You okay? It didn’t fall on your foot or anything, did it?”

Naturally, I was calling him all sorts of colorful insults in my mind.

“No, no, I’m fine. Sorry, Kunieda-san.”

“No need to apologize; I’m just glad it didn’t crush your toes. There’s some heavy stuff in there.”

With an unwavering smile, I gathered up all my belongings and straightened up once more. Just then, I noticed Tsuzuki looking at me in shock. Our eyes met. *Crap, am I coming off too fake?*

“Is something the matter?”

“Not particularly.”

After that, the interview went smoothly. We arranged another visit in three days, then headed back to the station.

“You know, he had me worried for a minute there,” the director remarked on the drive back. “He seemed like he was in a *really* bad mood.”

Yeah, and it was your job to warm him up! But instead you hid outside like a little coward!

“But when we walked back in, he seemed like he was back to normal. I should’ve known you’d work your magic, Kunieda.”

“No, no,” I demurred.

Granted, this was all part of my usual act, but I sincerely didn’t think it was my doing. I mean, the dude had “kill me now” written all over his face when we first showed up. Maybe he just needed a few minutes to wake up and realize how hot I was? Not that I wanted him to notice!

“Perhaps he has low blood pressure.” It was the safest theory I could offer.

Once I arrived back at my apartment, I turned back into my usual self. On my way home with my beloved beef bowl, however, I realized something critical: I had forgotten to set my DVR to record the current events debate starting tonight at 11 p.m. Admittedly it was just going to be a bunch of old guys with fancy titles bickering endlessly at each other...but the MC of the event was none other than Asou Keiichi himself, and I could already tell that the whole newsroom would be blathering about it nonstop come tomorrow morning. Plus, it couldn't hurt to observe a more experienced anchor at work.

If I start running, I can make it home in time. Gripping my to-go bag in one hand, I dashed forward—completely failing to notice that the pedestrian signal was red.

“Whoa!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a small light and a giant shadow. Then, in the next instant, they were gone again—their disappearance accompanied by a loud *CRASH*. Then I heard the faint creak of spinning wheels and looked down at the ground. There lay a bicycle. And a rider.

I gasped and hastily...checked the contents of my to-go bag. *The lid didn't come off when I jumped back, did it?*

“Nope. Still intact. Thank god.”

Relief flooded my chest as I confirmed the safety of my precious cargo. But the very next moment—

“*HEY!*” the bicyclist shouted at me from under his bike. “Not only did you just run into traffic like a lunatic, but you care more about your *food* than your fellow human being?!”

Oh, please. If you have the energy to scream at me, then you're fine. Wait a minute—I should probably get out of here.



Before I could shift into a run, however, the man pushed off his bike and jumped to his feet with alarming speed. And when the streetlamp illuminated his face, I froze like a deer in headlights. *Oh shit.*

It was Tsuzuki, the animator from earlier today. I was worried about bumping into this guy from the moment I found out where he lived, and sure enough, here he was. *What do I do? Make a run for it? No way! The guy's got a bike!*

"You're not going *anywhere*, buddy," Tsuzuki growled as though he'd read my mind. "Agh... Damn it, this hurts. All right, you take the handlebars—my left hand hurts too much to grasp anything. And the frame's all jacked up now, thanks to you."

Relax! He'll never find out you're Kunieda Kei! Willing my panic to subside, I wracked my brain for a way out of this conflict. *Do I confess to everything, or keep pretending not to know him? No, I have to keep pretending! What am I supposed to do if people find out that Kunieda Kei—ranked within Japan's Top 5 Favorite Male Anchors, nicknamed "Mr. No-Flub" by his peers, role model to all fledgling newscasters, the human personification of wit and beauty in equal measure—ignored a traffic signal and caused an accident? No, forget that! What if they find out I dress up like a hobo and buy beef bowls every night?! My life will be over! My public image—everything I built over the past twenty-five years—will crumble to dust!*

"Come on! Hurry up and grab the handle!"

"...How much do you want?"

"What?"

"For the bike and medical bills. A hundred grand? Two hundred? I'll pay whatever you want, so get off my back, all right? Because if you try to take this to the cops, trust me, they're not going to say the *pedestrian* was at fault for this."

"Excuse me?" Tsuzuki asked.

"Look, I'm in a hurry."

“And you think that makes it okay for you to run through a red light?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, give me a *break*, pal!” His voice was steadily building to a crescendo.

“The light was green.”

“Like hell it was!”

“Well, no one else was around to witness it, and I don’t see any cameras, so... it’s your word against mine.”

But before I could once again suggest money as a peaceful resolution, a fist collided with my skull.

“Ow!” Sparks scattered behind my eyelids.

“Now you know how I feel, jackass! Aagh, I forgot I wasn’t supposed to use my left hand! Now it hurts even worse!” Gripping his left wrist in his right hand, Tsuzuki was well and truly furious. “Your first instinct should have been to *apologize*! Who the hell raised you?! Anyone who can’t say ‘sorry’ or ‘thank you’ is human scum!”

He wasn’t exactly wrong, but...I mean, would he really accept an apology coming from the guy whose first thought was to check his beef bowl?

“Sorry,” I said anyway. “My bad.”

“You want me to deck you with my dominant hand this time?! Damn it, just... just carry your end of the bike, all right? My legs hurt like hell, so I’m not gonna be able to get it home by myself!”

I wanted to refuse, but...frankly, it posed a significant risk to me to have to keep bickering with this dude out here in public. At this hour, we could be reported for causing a disturbance. Plus, he didn’t seem interested in taking it to court or anything. But if I pissed him off any worse than I already had, things could get ugly fast...and I wasn’t confident I could take him, even taking his injuries into consideration.

“Fine.” I reluctantly grabbed the handlebars and started walking...then stopped myself. *You’re not supposed to know where he lives, genius!* “Which way?”

“That way.”

Between us, the cheapo cruiser bike wobbled unsteadily, either from the damage or the uneven momentum. Now that the fear of exposing my true identity had faded, I was free to curse my terrible luck: *Man, what the hell were you doing riding your bike at this time of night? For that matter, what the hell are you doing living in my neighborhood? God, this sucks.*

Just then, Tsuzuki spoke: “That bag you’ve got there...”

“Huh?”

“By any chance, is that a beef bowl from Sudou’s?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I go there all the time. Great food, am I right? But I feel like they must’ve changed the recipe. I don’t know what it is, but...doesn’t the sauce or gravy or whatever taste kinda different now?”

“Actually, yeah, I’ve noticed that, too,” I replied before I could stop myself. “The sweet-to-salty ratio is different.”

“Exactly! So, do you usually eat at the restaurant?”

“No. I get it to go.”

“Me too, mostly, except for every now and then. But their beer’s worse than piss!”

“All beer tastes like piss.”

“No, seriously! I don’t know if it’s the bartender or the server who screws it up, but either way, when it gets to your table, the head’s as thin as the film on a cup of hot milk!”

“Huh.” *Wait...why am I having a normal conversation with him?*

You’d think I’d be devastated to learn that we were both regulars at the same restaurant, and yet...for some reason, I was really enjoying this opportunity to talk to someone about beef bowls.

“Do you like BBQ chicken?” he asked. “You should try The Grill over behind the post office.”

“Do they let you order to go?”

“Yeah, totally!”

And so we arrived at the very same house I had visited earlier that afternoon.
All right, I kept my end of the bargain, so now I’m free to go, right?

“Okay, see ya.”

But before I could turn on my heel, he seized me by the wrist. “I’m not done talking to you! Sheesh, I can’t let my guard down for a single second. You know what? Give me your phone number, just in case.”

I blurted it out as fast as I could—my private number, to be clear. I couldn’t afford for him to reach me on my work phone.

“I’m never going to be able to remember that!”

“Not my problem.”

“What are you, five?!”

As we carried his bicycle inside, he gestured to the same couch from earlier. “Have a seat. And if you try anything funny, I’ll hole up in Sudou’s every *single* night until I catch you. I think you’ll find I’m very persistent.”

“Fine! Whatever!”

As Tsuzuki headed up the stairs, I did as instructed and sat down on the couch. When I saw how badly he was limping, even I started to feel a little guilty...but then again, it wasn’t as though he had a real job to go to. He’d just be holed up in here with his stop-motion crap regardless.

Idly, I picked up a tablet I found lying forgotten on the other end of the couch. At my touch, it woke from sleep mode and the screen lit up. *What, you left it on? And you don’t even have a password? That’s pretty careless—*

“What the...?!”

I shouted so loud I nearly ripped through my surgical mask.

“What’s up?” Tsuzuki called from upstairs.

“Huh? Oh...uh...I saw a cockroach!”

“What? You’re kidding! I’ve never had any cockroaches here. Kill it for me!”

“Fat chance!”

Obviously I was lying about the cockroach, but I had to come up with something—I was just that shocked. Of all the things I expected to see on a tablet screen, my own face was not one of them!

Not only that, but it was a pretty old photo of me, too. Specifically, it was a still image from a recording of the Mascot Sumo Grand Prix (MSGP for short) back when I first started out as a news anchor—the one where Asabi TV’s (extremely lame) mascot character Asazou tragically gets knocked out of the ring. Then his head pops off to reveal—surprise surprise—one very sweaty Kunieda Kei.

Back during my first year, they made me do all kinds of crap. See, if you’re an unknown quantity with stamina to spare, the production staff views you as their plaything to use as they see fit, and I was no exception. Variety shows, comedy shows, you name it—I did it all without complaint. As a rookie, I couldn’t afford to be choosy, or else they’d label me “useless” and I’d never get another gig with them so long as I lived. Why? Because the TV industry has no use for those who refuse to open themselves up to the possibility of humiliation. Of course, no one ever *wants* to make a fool of themselves, but at a lot of stations, that’s your entire job. Fortunately, in my case I was quickly given the label of “classy/unfunny” and after that they shifted me away from that part of the work altogether.

That being said, I felt no shame regarding my less-than-glamorous early years. Think about it: behind every A-list actress is a long history of gravure pin-up work, you know? It’s like that. I did what I had to do, and now it’s in the past. The only downside was whenever some loser with too much time on their hands dug it all back up again and spread it around online. Sure enough, when I scrolled down to the comments section, it was full of crap like “Ah, the early days, before the Prince was crowned.” *Dude, shut the hell up, all right? I was just doing my job, dumbass.*

More importantly, why the hell was Tsuzuki digging up my dirty laundry, anyway? This was no freak coincidence, either—I checked his search history and

found even more of my videos listed there. My one-day trial experience in an idol group, that time I rode in an aerobatic aircraft...all the ones that took the most physical stamina.

Anyway, this was no time for me to be waxing nostalgic about the good old days. Was he trying to gather dirt on me so he could rub it in my face? Did I piss him off or something? Because I was having trouble seeing this in an even remotely positive light. *You conniving little bastard*, I thought to myself like a total hypocrite. *Just so you know, you can try to humiliate me all you want, but I'm just gonna shrug it off.*

“Oh hey, you actually stayed!” Tsuzuki called as he walked back down the stairs. “Sorry about that. Took me a while to find a cold pack.” He noticed me fiddling with his tablet, and yet he didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. “Do you know him?”

“Hmm?” This raised my suspicions, since it felt like a trick question...and yet his tone was entirely casual.

“Kunieda Kei. He’s a news anchor for Asabi TV, usually on the evening timeslot.”

“Hmm...” Seriously, what was his angle?

“I actually feel kinda bad.”

“Hmm.”

“Is that all you know how to say?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Fine, forget it... Anyway, yesterday I was doing this interview for some other TV station, and I met this other male news anchor. He was kind of like Kunieda-san, all friendly and stuff...but the second I stepped away, he whirled around and started tearing his assistant director a new asshole. Kicked him in the shin.”

His expression hardened as though he were reliving the memory all over again.

“I overheard him saying crap like, ‘Go play in traffic, shit-for-brains!’ You wanna know why? Because the guy bought him the wrong brand of mineral

water. And I was like, ‘Jesus Christ, dude. Would it kill you to drink different water?’ You know? Like, who the hell *kicks* a guy over that kind of minor inconvenience? Not only that, but I heard him call our interview ‘a boring waste of time.’ But when I walked back in, magically he was all smiles again! Made me sick to my stomach, honestly.”

“Maybe he was having a bad day,” I offered. I wasn’t trying to defend the guy; I just meant that...well...that sort of low-level abuse wasn’t exactly uncommon. And not just in this particular industry, either.

“I mean, sure, maybe. But it still pissed me off. Made me think about all the people who treated me like dirt when I was just starting out, only for them to oh-so-conveniently change their tune as soon as my career started to take off, you know what I mean? I realized that maybe I wasn’t as over it as I thought. And at that point, I got so fed up with myself that I could barely get any work done. So there I was, sulking in bed, when Kunieda-san showed up to do his interview. And I couldn’t help but think, like, great, is this guy gonna bully his assistants, too?”

“Ouch. Harsh.” *C’mon, man. I had nothing to do with that other guy.*

“Yeah, I know. But anyway...there was this moment where the assistant director’s tripod snagged on Kunieda-san’s briefcase. Stuff went everywhere. But Kunieda-san—he didn’t get upset. If anything, he was worried it might’ve smashed the guy’s toes.”

ROFL. Man, I’m so glad I’m wearing this surgical mask so he can’t see my shit-eating grin right now. He’s completely bought my little act! Hook, line, and sinker! What a schmuck!

No matter how worthless and easily replaceable they were as subcontractors, there was no value in beating up an assistant director. After all, there was still a tiny chance they might grow up into someone important someday—just like there was a 1-in-1,000 chance that any given baby sea turtle would survive to adulthood.

It was starting to feel like Tsuzuki didn’t fully grasp even the most laughably basic of survival skills, and for that I pitied him. *What a sad, sheltered little man.*

“So then,” he continued, “I spot this book on the floor. It’s a dictionary—and

not just any dictionary, but an *intonation* dictionary. I didn't know news anchors even studied up on that stuff."

"Hmm." I got the sense it would be weird to stay quiet, so I nodded vaguely.

"What, you knew that?"

He leaned in closer and stared at me. I hastily leaned away. "No!"

"Hmph. Anyway, the book was practically falling apart, and it had a bunch of tabs sticking out of it, and I thought... Y'know, maybe this guy's not who I thought he was. So then I searched him up and watched some of his videos. Honestly, I thought being a newscaster was all about acting self-important and reading a script without flubbing it, but this guy? He puts 110 percent effort into everything he does, no matter what. I was actually really impressed."

God, I'm so glad you're stupid. It's going to make the rest of this film project so much easier.

"Next time I see him, I wanna apologize. You think he'll forgive me?"

Dude, you don't have to apologize. You'll just make everything awkward. But I didn't feel like trying to explain that to him, so instead I said, "Yeah, probably."

"You really think so?"

"Let it go already," I snapped back on reflex. "If you're only apologizing so he'll forgive you, then don't freakin' bother. Only do it if you mean it."

"Whoa." He stared at me intently. Naturally, this made me panic internally. "You know, for an asshole, you make a really good point."

"Screw you."

"No, seriously, you're right. I should apologize because it's the right thing to do." With this deep, dark secret finally off his chest, Tsuzuki's whole face lit up. Then he offered me his cold pack.

"Nah, you keep it."

"What? No, I'm not giving it to you—I need you to help me stick it on. I can't do it one-handed."

He rolled up the sleeve of his hoodie to reveal a fat bruise on his left hand.

“Shouldn’t you go to the hospital...?”

“I’ll make an appointment first thing tomorrow, but I doubt it’s broken or anything.”

He pointed to the affected area with his good hand, and I carefully applied the sticky side of the cold pack. He shivered slightly.

“Brrr.”

“Well... I’d better go.”

This time I was sure he’d let me leave, but nope, he grabbed me by the hand once again. “Wait, wait, wait, wait.”

“The hell do you want now? I applied your cold pack, didn’t I?”

“You think that’s the whole reason I made you sit and wait for me? No, we’re only just getting started. Actually, I was wondering...” He yanked me back down onto the couch. “Why haven’t you asked me about it?”

“About what?”

“You know, the stuff I have lying around? The interviews I’ve been doing? Doesn’t that make you wonder who I am and what I do?”

No, because I already know. But obviously I couldn’t say that, so instead I answered, “I don’t really care.”

“You should still ask to be polite, you know. Whatever. Basically, I’m a filmmaker. I make everything by hand. And right now, I’m working on a big project with a deadline coming up soon.”

“Okay...?”

“In other words, I’m in a real bind if I can’t use my left hand...so I was thinking you ought to make it up to me by helping out with my work for a while.”

“No thanks.”

“What makes you think you’re in any position to say no?”

“Because like I told you, I’m willing to reimburse you in cash. Just use my money to hire a guy or something.”

“Why is it always about money with you? Money, money, money! Don’t you ever feel like a broken record?”

“No, I don’t.” I jumped to my feet and poked my thumb against my chest. “Look, I’m no billionaire, okay? I work *hard* for my money. Harder than the average. And as a result, I get paid more than the average, too. So if it’s something I’ve earned through good, honest work, then what’s wrong with using it as I please? Hmm? There’s no shame in it!”

Tsuzuki stared blankly back at me as he processed this passionate declaration. Then he started to applaud.

“What?” I snapped.

“No, I mean, you’re totally right. For some reason you can be really persuasive, you know that?”

“Gee, thanks.”

“What’s your name, anyway?”

I hesitated for a moment, then said, “Owari.”

Little did he know, however, this was just simple wordplay on my part. With different kanji, Tsuzuki could mean “to be continued”; likewise, Owari meant “the end.”

“Gotcha. I’m Tsuzuki, so that’s kind of similar. Or not really, I guess. What’s your first name, then?”

“None of your business.”

“Point taken. Okay, well, could you show up sometime tomorrow night? Anytime’s fine—whatever works for you. I just need a couple hours of your time.”

“What?”

“I promise, it’s very simple work.”

“No, no, no, no! Were you not listening to a single word I said?”

“Sure I was. You’re a funny guy, Owari. I’d hate for this friendship to end so soon.”

Oh, you'd hate it? Because I'd love it, actually!

"Plus, I can pay you...kinda."

"What do you mean, kinda?"

"I'll buy you a beef bowl for dinner each night...?"

"Cheapskate." *How idiotic.* I got back to my feet, and this time he didn't try to stop me.

"See you tomorrow," he grinned from the entranceway.

"No, you won't! I'm not coming, and that's final! End of story!"

And yet he kept grinning at me through the crack in the door.

After I got home, I realized I'd forgotten my beef bowl at his house, but I couldn't find the will to go back for it, much less buy a replacement meal. I was exhausted. Not only did I get dragged into a giant headache, but I missed the debate, too...and worst of all, Tsuzuki wanted me to start doing volunteer work at his house?

Ridiculous. Does he not understand that two hours is a lot of time for a grown adult with a real job? I'm not doing that crap. It's not my problem... Well, okay, it's kinda my fault that his hand's all banged up. Seriously, that bruise looked pretty gnarly... Like, really purple... No, no, no! Don't think about it! I gotta do my nightly news review!

I plopped down cross-legged on the couch, same as always...but that night, I didn't hunch over and take my notes. Instead, my mind kept drifting back to Tsuzuki and the way he described his encounter with "Kunieda Kei." His voice... The way he smiled right before I left... Images flashed through my mind of the long, cold walk back to his place, pushing his busted bike between us...

"Forget it..."

What was it about him that destroyed my focus? For years I had never missed a single day of review, overtime and after-work drinking excursions be damned...until tonight, when I finally threw in the towel and turned off the TV partway through. But even after I crawled into bed, I couldn't quite fall asleep. My head was throbbing with residual excitement, like I was a little kid on

summer break or something.

Thinking about it, I realized it was the first time I'd ever spent so much time being my true self around someone who wasn't related to me.

"Hey there," Tsuzuki greeted me casually when I showed up at his house the next night. Almost like it was no surprise whatsoever. This pissed me off.

"My beef bowl," I replied brusquely. "Left it here last night."

"Oh yeah, I ate it. It was stone cold, but still really good."

"You *thief*!"

"Like I said, I'll buy you another. Now quit hurling accusations at me on my doorstep, would you?" He slung an arm around my shoulder and guided me inside. Normally my body would recoil violently if another person tried to touch me without warning, but for some reason, I didn't mind it. Then I *realized* that I didn't mind it...and smacked his hand away roughly.

"Whoa."

"Just so we're clear... I don't swing that way."

"What?"

"I saw online that you... 'identify as bisexual' or whatever."

"Wait, really?"

"Don't play dumb with me!"

"I'm not, I'm not!" He fell silent for a moment, then hit upon some sort of realization—"Oh!"—and looked up. "It must've been the stuff I said in that one magazine interview I did. Huh...I didn't think anyone would make a note of it."

"So you *are* bisexual!"

"I never said that. I just said that I have a very specific type, and I don't really care about their gender as long as they check off all the right boxes. I really don't think it's the same thing as identifying as bi or whatever. What, did you think I was gonna come on to you? Please. I have *very* high standards. And you look like you just got back from robbing a 7-Eleven."

“Screw you!” You have no idea how hot I am underneath all this! Rrgh, I wish I could show him exactly what he’s missing!

“Come here,” he beckoned.

I walked over into his workshop area. He gestured to a box full of pale gray humanoid figures, each of them less than ten centimeters tall.

“What are those, GI Joes?” I asked.

“What? No! They’re not *soldiers*, genius!”

I squinted down at them. Sure enough, there were men in business suits, pairs of young college students... The only facial feature they had to speak of was a little nose sticking out—no eyes or mouth. Yet somehow, they each seemed unique in their own right.

“You made all these?”

“Yeah. It’s what I do for a living.”

There were so many of them, I couldn’t begin to count.

“I’m going to use them to create a title sequence for a news program.”

Yeah, I know.

“So I’m thinking I’ll recreate a busy intersection. You know, like the Shibuya Scramble Crossing or something.”

“Wow. You must really enjoy making yourself suffer.”

Each of the little clay figures had their own custom outfit, hairstyle, and accessories. My mind reeled at the thought of how much time and effort it must have taken to craft all these.

Wait... Is this what I think it is...?

“Please don’t tell me you want me to make a bunch of these.”

“No, no!”

I let out a sigh of relief. *Good, because that would be insane—*

“I just want you to paint them.”

“No way!”

“You’ll be fine! If you mess up, you can just paint over it! To be honest, I want them to have a sort of ‘imperfect’ or ‘amateur’ touch to them. But if I tried to paint them badly on purpose, it would end up looking really obviously fake, y’know? So I honestly need your help with this. Anyway, the paint’s over there, so go ahead and take a crack at it. Paint ’em however you want.”

“And what if I want to paint their skin green? What then?”

“Well, you’ll probably want to exercise some level of judgment. Think about it—this is going on national TV, so you’ll get to brag to your friends, like, ‘See that? I painted that!’”

“I don’t want your stupid bragging rights.” *I’m already on TV enough as it is.*

“Dude, it’s really not that hard. What, are you bad with your hands or something? Or are you just chicken?” he smirked.

“Say that again, asshole?”

“Aagh! If only my hand didn’t hurt so bad!” he sighed melodramatically. “I went to the doctor and they told me it’s a sprain! It’ll take two to three *weeks* for a full recovery!”

“Oh boy...”

“What if I don’t recover in time? This gig’s for a major TV network, so if I screw it up, I might get put on some kind of blacklist and never work in this field again! Plus, not only will I not get paid, but I might have to pay damages for breaching my contract!”

“Fine! *Fine!* I’ll do it, okay?! Are you happy now?!”

It would’ve been all too easy to wriggle out of this even with his guilt tripping, and yet, here I was. Honestly, I was screwed from the moment I showed up on his doorstep. *Damn it, what’s gotten into me?*

This was my first experience working with acrylic paint, but fortunately, it wasn’t that different from any other paint. Squirt it out of a tube, dilute with a bit of water, and there you go. To start with, I grabbed ten figures at random—*Let’s call this Group 1, shall we?* Then I picked up my fine-point brush and gave all ten of them the same color of skin, hair, and clothing.

While I worked, Tsuzuki was mostly on his computer, but after about an hour, he wandered back over. Then he picked up one of my finished pieces and furrowed his brow.

“What?” I asked, recoiling slightly. “Just so you know, I’m not redoing a single one of these. You said I could paint them however I want, remember?”

“No, that’s not it.” He shook his head softly. “They’re really good, actually. I’m impressed—I wasn’t expecting you to actually try.”

Then don’t come over here and give me a heart attack, I thought. And what do you mean, “actually?” Of course they’re good. I’m the kind of guy who can pick up just about any skill with a little practice. Everyone says so.

Meanwhile, Tsuzuki looked around at the rest of the figurines and let out a small chuckle.

“What?” I demanded.

“You can learn a lot about someone through this kind of manual labor. More than you might think.”

“What...?”

“Let me guess: this one was your first attempt, and this is your most recent, right? You’ve improved dramatically in a very short time frame. Thus, I can infer that you’re a quick study when it comes to new things.”

Damn right I am. But I didn’t have time to get smug about it—his assessment wasn’t finished there.

“And yet...you seem to have a better eye for color than you initially claimed. Surprisingly enough, you’re sensible to a fault. No sense of adventure.”

“You’re the one who told me to ‘exercise my best judgment’ or whatever!” I snapped back, annoyed. And why was I annoyed, you ask? Because he was absolutely right about me.

“Even then, someone with bad judgment still would’ve done badly, since they wouldn’t know any better. But you, on the other hand—for better or worse, you’re extremely levelheaded. Which is funny, since my first impression of you was a lot more selfish.”

Oh yeah? We just met yesterday, and already you think you can psychoanalyze me? That alone was enough to raise my hackles...and worse still, he wasn't even that far off. I was struck with the impulse to plunge my current work in progress into a bucket of solid black paint, but I resisted. After all, I got the feeling it would only create more work for me in the end.

He thinks he's got me all figured out, but he doesn't even know my true identity, I reminded myself, willing my mind calm. *I still have the upper hand.*

Then, once precisely two hours had elapsed since my arrival, I rose to my feet. "All right, I'm leaving."

"Okay then, I'll head out with you. Gotta buy you your beef bowl, after all."

As we walked down the street, Tsuzuki pushing his mostly fixed bike, I once again found myself wondering: Why? Why was I still hanging out with this guy when my moral obligation to him was already fulfilled? Was it because he ate my beef bowl from yesterday? If so, then...what the hell was I doing, harping on about a mere 500 yen? Sure, he wasn't questioning my identity as of right now, but every additional minute I spent with him only further increased that risk...

"So what do you do for a living, Owari?"

"Not telling."

"Do you live by yourself?"

"None of your goddamn business."

But no matter how curt I was with him, he never took offense. Almost like he'd somehow analyzed my personality after just two days' worth of extremely short conversations. God, that pissed me off. Luckily for me, he was walking on my right-hand side...so I balled my right hand into a fist and (lightly) brought it down on his left wrist as he steered the bike.

"Ouch! What was that for?!"

"For trying to pry into my personal life. Just shut your mouth."

"Are you like this with everybody? Seems exhausting."

It is exhausting, actually. But only because I'm not like this with anyone else. "Just leave me alone, man."

When we got there, he ordered two beef bowls to go. In separate bags, of course.

“Wanna eat back at my place?”

“No, I’m going home. Obviously.”

“Okay, well, you should come by again sometime,” he replied as he set his to-go bag in his bike basket. “My deadline’s at the end of March, so I’m in crunch mode.”

“Oh, please. You’ll be all healed up in two measly weeks.”

“The doctor said two to *three* weeks.”

“Yeah, well, doctors exaggerate.”

As I turned to go, I heard him call from behind me: “Thanks for your help today.”

I took a handful of steps down the street, then casually paused and glanced back over my shoulder, but Tsuzuki and his crooked cruiser bike were nowhere to be seen. Just dim, cold, empty pavement. I tugged my mask down and let out a foggy sigh.

I was half-worried he was going to follow me home, you know, since he was such a nosy little rat—and I really didn’t want him knowing where I lived, thank you very much—but apparently not. Apparently, he actually was on his way back home, same as me. *Good. What a relief.*

So why was I standing there in the cold, searching for him?

“Oh, interesting. So you film it all on your cell phone? You don’t need any fancy equipment or anything?”

“Obviously there are limitations involved, but I usually find a way around them...or sometimes I just make the most of what I’ve got, y’know? There were definitely times in my life where my heart was set on buying all the latest tech, so I’d work whatever part-time job in order to save up for it. But these days, I’m like, meh.”

“So there you have it, folks—an insider look at the world of stop-motion animation. Tune in tomorrow, when Tsuzuki-san will be giving us a crash course in Animation 101, and find out how you can start your very own weekend project! We’ll see you then.”

“Cut! That’s a wrap!”

Once I made sure the cameras were off, I excused myself, covered my mouth, and sneezed softly.

“You sick?” asked Tsuzuki, and I suppressed the urge to slap him silly.

It’s your fault I stood out in the cold winter streets for ten-plus minutes, zoning out! Well, okay...no, it isn’t. But still. “No, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

As the film crew reviewed their freshly taken footage, Tsuzuki muttered, “Sorry.”

“Huh?” *I didn’t say any of that aloud, did I?* My “camera smile” froze stiffly on my face.

“About what happened last time,” he clarified.

Oh, right. Next time start with that part, genius.

“I had a crappy attitude for reasons that had nothing to do with you. You didn’t deserve that. So yeah...I’m sorry.”

As Tsuzuki solemnly bowed to me, I bit back a laugh of a different stripe. In my mind, I was thinking, *I can’t believe you actually went through with it. Don’t take everything so seriously, you dumbass.* But contrary to my internal monologue, out of my mouth came, “What? No, don’t be,” tinged with just the right amount of hesitation.

Honestly, sometimes I impressed myself with how automatic my responses felt. Like an RPG battle on auto mode. Or maybe my brain was running KuniedaKei.exe in the background.

“You haven’t offended me in the least, so I see no reason for you to apologize,” I assured him.

“You mean it?”

“Of course.”

“Cool.”

In Tsuzuki’s relief, an unguarded smile spread across his face. For a moment, the sight of it made my chest ache, as though a tiny crack had formed on the surface of my heart—so small, not even a thread could fit through it. Fortunately, that moment was fleeting, and I summarily ignored it.

“A friend of mine encouraged me to apologize to you, actually,” he said.

“Did they now?” *What friend? You mean me? Because I’m sure as hell not your friend, chief.*

“Yeah. I only just met him the other day, but he’s a total riot.”

“Interesting.”

“He’s an oddball, and he swears like a sailor. Yeah... He’s the total opposite of you, now that I think about it.”

Not sure if I should take that as a compliment. But naturally Tsuzuki had no inkling of precisely who he was talking to, and so he grinned like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Did you bring your intonation dictionary today?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s in my briefcase. I don’t really need it for this interview, but I like to carry it around as a sort of good-luck charm. There’s just something reassuring about having it on hand. Sometimes, right before a broadcast, or whenever I’m especially nervous, I like to flip through it at random. After all, they say the more stressed you are, the more important it is that you carry on like normal.”

“I gotta admit, your voice is pretty enjoyable to listen to.” Tsuzuki nodded. “It’s super mellow, with this sort of silky quality to it? But you always enunciate clearly, and your pacing is perfect. You must have put a lot of practice into it.”

Damn right I have. You don’t even know the half of it. “You flatter me, but honestly, I’m still a novice.”

“If you’re a ‘novice,’ then so am I.”

“Don’t be silly!” I stared at him, my eyes wide. All an act, of course. “A novice

wouldn't have seen half the success you have!"

"Honestly, I regret everything I've ever made. Every time I think I've created something special, I *immediately* start to see its flaws. But when you create for a living, the only way to get over your mistakes is to make something new, y'know?"

"That's the sort of thing you should save for when the cameras are rolling..."

"What? No way." He grimaced, possibly in embarrassment.

Just as I had shown Tsuzuki two sides of myself, so too did he act remarkably different around each of those sides. But then again, maybe any normal person —

That was the point at which I stopped myself to ask: *Am I really that different from a "normal" person? Well... Yeah, I guess I am. But at the same time, I still lead a "normal" life.*

I always hated phrases like "the real you" or "one's true self." To me, it was borderline insanity to believe that other people would see any sort of value in your ugliest, most imperfect self. Hence I channeled all my energy into creating a likeable persona until it came so naturally to me that I could respond on autopilot without even thinking.

And unlike Tsuzuki, I was perfectly satisfied with what I had created.

That night, "Owari" turned up on Tsuzuki's doorstep yet again. As soon as Tsuzuki opened the door, the first thing out of his mouth was, "I apologized!"

Thanks for the status update, champ, but I was there. Dumbass. "Oh yeah?"

"He said he wasn't offended," he continued cheerfully, and my chest ached again—more sharply than it had that afternoon.

Must be because I'm so frustrated with him, I decided. *Here I am, putting up with his busywork to the point that I caught a cold, and he's dancing around on cloud nine. Of course it pisses me off.*

Or so I told myself.

During a dry run in the editing booth, something caught my attention on the monitor, and I abruptly stopped reading the script. “Hold on a minute. Isn’t that a little problematic?” I asked the director, who stared blankly back.

It was during an interview with a member of the National Diet who was suspected of making unlawful campaign contributions.

“See?” I said. “You can see him entering his condo’s access code on camera.”

“Oh crap, you’re right!”

The picture quality wasn’t especially crisp, but anyone who zoomed in on the keypad could easily figure out the four-digit code.

“Sorry about that!” said the director. “I’ll have them blur out that part. Hang on a sec.”

“Sure thing.”

“Man, am I ever glad you caught that! Thanks a bunch, Kunieda.”

“No problem.”

Incompetent moron. It’s YOUR job to think about this crap, you ignorant pleb. Maybe I’ll take a marker and play Connect the Dots on your stupid polka dot tie, I growled internally as I stepped out of the booth.

Then, as I waited in a nearby chair and passed the time reading the newspaper, someone suddenly called out to me: “Kunieda-kun?”

“Yes?”

The second I looked up, however, I froze in spite of myself, my facial muscles unsure what sort of expression they were meant to form.

Standing before me was a man, approximately forty years old, with a face I thought I vaguely recognized—but that wasn’t the part I took issue with. No, my problem was everything from the neck down. He was wearing a pastel cardigan tied around his shoulders, and under that was a cotton button-up shirt tucked into chino pants. As my gaze panned further down his body, I noticed he was also sporting a pair of loafers with no socks.

In other words, everything about him screamed “sketchiest man alive.”

Just then, one of the veteran crew members walked by. “Oh hey, Shitara-san! What are you doing here?”

“I’m allowed to be here, aren’t I? I work for this station, you know.”

Shitara? As in the executive producer for The News? The head honcho whose program overhaul will determine the entire fate of our station’s twenty-year-old signature news show?

“What’s with the outfit?” the crew member asked.

“Lost a bet, and my punishment was to come to work wearing a cosplay costume. So this is my ‘producer’ cosplay! Get it?”

Oh, I get it now. It’s a self-parody. Wait a minute... Our executive producer is wearing producer cosplay to work? Isn’t that kind of ridiculous? Sorry, stupid question—that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard! Good god, this overhaul hasn’t even started and it’s already screwed. The whole station is going down in flames, I just know it.

“You’re definitely rocking the look, but I can’t help but feel that something’s missing...” the crew member said.

“Yeah, me too, actually.”

“Oh! You know what you need? Some aviators! Ooh, or some tinted glasses! Like, on top of your head, you know?”

“That’s perfect!” Shitara snapped his fingers. “I’ll go ask the prop department if they have any.”

“Weren’t you in the middle of something?”

“Oh, right.”

First he calls my name, and then he immediately forgets that I exist. Great.

Finally, he turned back to me. “Hi there, I’m Shitara. Sorry to make you evening folks do all the promo work for *The News*! I wanted to come and thank you personally for your work. My apologies for interrupting.”

“No, no, you’re not interrupting at all.” Having regained my composure, I rose

to my feet and smiled gently. “I’m looking forward to the new and improved *News.*” *In more ways than one.*

“Ha ha! That’s the most frightening thing you could have possibly said!”

“Do you have anything special planned for the first broadcast?”

“Mmm, not yet. If you have any ideas, shoot ’em my way, okay?”

“What?” I stared at him, speechless. *Dude, those two months are going to fly by before you know it!*

“I’m just messing with you,” he laughed. “We’ve got something in the works, but I can’t give out any details just yet. Soon, though.”

“Oh, I see. I’ll try my best to be patient.” *Cool story. Nobody cares.*

“Say, Kunieda-kun, why don’t we grab dinner sometime? I’ve been out of the area for so long that I haven’t had a chance to get to know any of our younger anchors, and I’d like to fix that. You can think of it as a token of my gratitude for doing the Tsuzuki interviews.”

“That’s extremely generous of you, sir. Thank you. I’d be happy to.”

Truth be told, it sounded like a whole lot of hassle that I would’ve preferred to avoid, but since he was technically my superior—albeit not directly—I couldn’t risk offending him. So instead I decided I would play nice this time around, then find a way to decline any subsequent invites. It was the safest option.

“I’m free anytime after 7:30, so I’ll let you choose the date, Shitara-san.”

“Yeah? All right then, I’ll get in touch once I’ve got it all figured out. Sorry for barging in! Anyway...” Shitara turned to leave, then suddenly stopped short. “Oh, and don’t worry—I promise I won’t wear this getup to dinner,” he added as an afterthought.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Like hell I will. It took an incredible amount of willpower to maintain a smile. The absolute last thing I wanted was an intimate dinner for two with some middle-aged man. Fortunately, it was right around then that my news recording finished reediting, so I went back to rehearsal.

“You know, Kunieda, it feels like you’ve gotten even better lately,” the director commented.

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do. Don’t get me wrong, you were always really talented, but these days your voice feels...clearer? More polished, maybe? And you caught that error, too. You’re doing wonderful work all around.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Is it some external influence from your personal life? Did you get a girlfriend or something?”

“No, no, nothing like that.”

Subtitle: *Get bent, asswipe.*

I don’t get it. I just don’t get it, I thought to myself over and over.

But at some point it must have slipped out, because Tsuzuki looked up at me as he stood hunched over his latest set piece. “What was that?”

“Huh?”

“Sounded like you said you ‘don’t get it.’ Get what?”

“Forget it.”

“Man, you’re so weird. Not that I didn’t already know that.”

“Keep your little comments to yourself, would you?”

He straightened up, clutching his lower back. “Ugh.”

“What are you, sixty?”

“I think I’m gonna end up with a hunchback...”

The two-week (or hell, two-to three-week) recovery period had long since come and gone. All the clay figurines were now painted (though more than half Tsuzuki handled himself), and there was no longer any work left that an amateur like me could handle. So instead, while Tsuzuki worked on his project, I sat around and watched TV, surfed the web, or read manga I brought from

home—all things I easily could have done at my own house.

Tsuzuki had regained the use of his left hand, and yet he never sent me away; likewise, I kept showing up. He never outright stated whether I was invited; likewise, I never said whether I was coming. And so there we were, hanging out spontaneously a few times per week.

Frankly, it was an utter misuse of my time. I didn't stand to gain anything from it. Each visit would inevitably throw my nightly schedule off by several hours, resulting in even less sleep, and I always found myself regretting my choice on the walk home. I'd think to myself, *What am I doing, wasting my precious off-hours on this crap?* Then I'd resolve to never go back there again...but a few days later, somehow I'd find myself making the trek once more.

Not only that, but Tsuzuki had given me (a total stranger, lest you forget) his spare key, since he supposedly wouldn't be able to hear the doorbell ringing while he was hyper-focused. And worst of all, I actually *took* the damn thing.

So, was this ultimately impacting my work? The answer was a resounding no. Physically, I was feeling better than ever—hell, my director had even complimented me on my recent performance. Clearly all this slacking off was having a net positive effect on me...

Actually, maybe that was what kept bringing me to Tsuzuki's place. Maybe I just wanted someone to cut me some slack for a change.

On some nights Tsuzuki was really chatty, and on others he spent the whole time silently engrossed in his work. There were even nights when we didn't speak at all. He didn't coddle me, just as I refused to coddle him. Sure, he sometimes asked questions that were a little too personal for my liking, but I was always free to ignore them. In terms of comfort, this place was second only to my own apartment. But on the other hand, hanging out here meant I had to admit to myself that I was carrying a lot of pent-up stress, and I was kind of scared to.

To distract myself, I picked up one of the storyboards Tsuzuki had left lying around and started flipping through it. The pages depicted an astronaut piloting a spaceship over the earth, gazing down at the crowds of people living their daily lives. Then the astronaut sheds a single tear, and...The End. A very short

story, all told.

“So what’s the deal with the astronaut?”

I figured Tsuzuki might not hear me, since he was busy setting up the stage lighting and checking for shadows, but then he replied, “The astronaut is a time traveler from a future where the Earth is destroyed and all of humanity has moved on to other planets...and he’s the last descendant. So he travels back to the birthplace of his species and grieves over just how many humans there used to be.”

“Yikes, depressing much?”

“Yeah, well, a lot of creative people are depressed.”

You sure don’t seem depressed, I thought to myself. Tsuzuki had great posture and a voice that carried well, and he was always flashing a toothy grin. As a result, he’d quickly won over most of the interview crew. But then again, surely even he must have some hidden depths I wasn’t privy to.

“So what’s the overarching theme?” I asked.

“Huh? I don’t have one. Man, why does everyone always ask me that? ‘Oh, what’s the theme? What’s the message?’ Does it really matter?”

“Well...” *Considering all the time and passion you invest into it, one would think you’d have an answer to that question.*

“I think of something I want to make, and then I make it. Every time. End of story. There’s no deeper meaning behind it—I just want to create something. I mean, it’s possible I *am* working off of some kind of theme without realizing it, but it’s not intentional. I want to leave that kind of thing up to the viewer to decide for themselves.”

“So you just half-ass all your projects?”

“You know the word ‘animation’?” Tsuzuki continued. “The ‘anima’ part means soul. And I don’t think souls should be restricted to one singular form, y’know?”

Yeah, yeah. It’s Latin or whatever. I know. You already told me—or rather, “Kunieda Kei”—all about it last week, remember? And then “Kunieda Kei” acted

all impressed and told you how “deep” he thought it was, and you flashed those pearly whites, like, “Look at me, I’m soooo smart!” I see right through you, dumbass! Is my external persona really that perfect, or are you just dense as a brick?

Tsuzuki peered at me. “Uh...hello? You listening?”

“Nope.”

“Damn it, man, you’re the one who started this conversation! Ugh, I can’t mess with this part since they’re gonna film it soon... What should I do...?”

“Conversation? More like a one-man monologue,” I retorted. “Isn’t it annoying, having to stop what you’re doing and put everything on hold just for some stupid cameras?”

“Not as annoying as it must be for them, having to lug those heavy things in and out every time.”

Other than that first day we showed up, Tsuzuki was nothing but nice to the entire crew. Normally, time has a way of warming people up to the point that they start pushing the envelope and wearing their emotions more openly on their sleeve...and yet Tsuzuki never complained about the script or questioned why we had to do things a certain way. Was it because he could relate to the struggle of production?

“Besides, I always enjoy having Kunieda-san over.”

Convenient, because I’m right here.

“I never thought of myself as a chatty guy, but whenever I’m talking to him, I can’t seem to stop myself. I don’t know if he’s a good listener or if he just knows how to ask all the right questions.”

“Hmmm.” You’d think I’d be feeling pretty smug about myself right now, and yet some part of me wasn’t entirely enthused. It was annoying how excited Tsuzuki got whenever he was talking about... *Wait, what? So I get annoyed whenever he’s excited? What for? I don’t get it.*

“Oh yeah, that reminds me,” Tsuzuki said. “I’ve got dinner plans next week, so I won’t be around that night. You’re still free to come over, of course, but I can’t

say for sure when I'll get home."

"Dinner plans? I guess you must not be too worried about that big deadline you've got coming up."

"Oh, lay off. It's a business dinner."

"That's what they all say, until you end up at a hostess club."

"I guess we'll see how it goes."

What kind of response is that? So you'll do whatever they want to do, is that it? Great, now I'm mad again. Feels like I'm really touchy these days... Weird.

"Have *you* ever been to a hostess club?" Tsuzuki asked.

"So what if I have?"

"Wait, seriously? You have?"

"I've been to my share of 'business dinners,' yeah."

"Interesting." Tsuzuki looked thoughtful. "Did you have fun?"

"Hell no. The drinks suck and the girls are shallow. Plus, they expect *you* to entertain *them*! 'Tell me a funny story?' How about I tell you to get lost, uggo?"

"What do you care whether the hostess entertains you? Knowing you, you probably wouldn't even give her the time of day."

"Damn right. Why the hell would I care about her tiny dog or whatever? I don't even know her!"

"Sounds like it's not her fault then," he snickered. He followed this up with, "Do you have a girlfriend, Owari?" But a moment later, he seemed to think better of it. "On second thought, I doubt you'll tell me."

"Then don't ask!"

"I'm just curious, man."

"No, I don't... Women are too much of a hassle."

"A boyfriend, then?"

"Men are even worse."

“Neither?! Let me guess: you’re too in love with yourself or something?”

“Screw you!”

Incensed, I grabbed one of the old, worn-out couch cushions and flung it at him. Unfortunately, he caught it with ease.

“Hey, watch it! Hit me if you have to, but be mindful of the set, all right?”

But I ignored his complaints and stormed out of the house.

“Hey! Wait!”

Then I proceeded to ignore him all the way home. *Cram it, dumbass. You’re so stupid, you don’t even realize who I am.*

As I stormed down the streets, I plunged my hands into my pockets so hard, the stitches threatened to give out.

In love with myself? Sure, whatever you say. Can you blame me? Everyone else is a goddamn moron and it pisses me off. They only ever let me down. There’s not one good thing about them.

But more than anything, what upset me was that Tsuzuki made it sound like I was wrong for feeling this way. What an asshole!

I didn’t spend my entire life “playing nice” because someone else told me to. Right from an early age, everyone called me “smart” and “kind,” and my kid brain decided, *Ah, so this is what I’m supposed to do.* Then I started doing it to impress them...and before I knew it, I was an adult.

My foul mouth and pessimistic personality were traits I was born with; no one was to blame for “causing” them. And since I wasn’t trying to point the finger at anyone else, surely I didn’t deserve to be criticized. *Screw him and the high horse he rode in on.*

And so I vowed I would never, *ever* go back to Tsuzuki’s again.

“Thanks for making time in your busy schedule for me, fellas,” Shitara grinned. He seemed like he was in a good mood.

“Sure thing.”

“No problem.”

I smiled modestly and took a sip of my champagne. The three of us were situated evenly around a round table: myself, Shitara, and *Tsuzuki*.

So this is what you meant by “business dinner”?

I’d already come to terms with the fact that “Kunieda Kei” would still have to visit Tsuzuki’s house for work, but I was *not* expecting to see him here, and it caught me off guard. Now I was furious all over again. *God, I want to punch your face in.*

Meanwhile, Tsuzuki sat fiddling idly with the knot of his tie. “I’m glad I asked for the name of the restaurant ahead of time, ’cuz I would’ve showed up totally underdressed, and they wouldn’t have let me in. Why’d you bring us here, anyway? You got a more refined palate now that you’re some big-name corporate hotshot?” he asked Shitara.

“Nonsense.” Shitara let out a self-deprecating laugh. As promised, he was wearing an ordinary business suit instead of his producer cosplay. “I’ve been out of Tokyo so long, I don’t know any good places anymore. So I asked my secretary to pick a place for me, and funnily enough, when I mentioned Kunieda-kun was coming, what do you know—she was suddenly very motivated!”

Evidently this was what she had settled on: a hole-in-the-wall French restaurant.

“Me, I would’ve been fine with some teppanyaki or something, but she insisted I take ‘our beloved prince’ somewhere nice.”

“I’m really not that picky,” I demurred. *Man, these tiny champagne bubbles really aren’t doing it for me. I don’t care if it’s winter—I could kill for a beer right about now.*

“How’s work going on your end, Ushio-kun?”

“Not bad! You could come see it, y’know. You being the producer and all.”

“True, but I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise. Besides, I already have a general idea of what to expect from *The Evening File*’s video segments.”

“All right, well, don’t come crying to me if you decide you don’t like the finished product!”

“No worries there. I’m a big fan of yours, so I’m sure I’ll love it. Plus, I have full creative control, so I don’t need any of the higher-ups to sign off on it.”

Based on the way they spoke to one another, I could tell they were close friends who trusted each other. Their last gig together must’ve been a blast.

Look at them, two peas in a pod. Why’d they even bother inviting me? You guys realize that if the higher-ups hate it, they’ll just sweep it all under the rug with another overhaul six months from now, right? And then Tsuzuki’s precious stop-motion sequence will end up right in the trash...not that I care, of course. It’s no business of mine who you hang out with or what happens to your work.

“Would you like another drink, Kunieda-kun?” Shitara asked.

“Huh? Oh, uh...sure.” It was then that I realized I’d finished off my glass of cheap champagne.

“You’re more of a drinker than I thought!”

“Forgive me. I was feeling particularly parched... In that case, could I get some white wine? Sommelier’s choice.”

Play it cool, play it cool, I told myself as I continued to feign interest in the conversation. Then, right as the soup arrived at our table, Tsuzuki asked: “Hey, Kunieda-san?”

“Yes?”

“What made you want to be a newscaster?”

“This is sudden...”

“Not really. I’ve been wondering about it for a while, actually. I just haven’t had the chance to ask you during the interview filming since we’re always so busy.”

“The answer is,” Shitara cut in, “Kunieda-kun never actually *wanted* to be a newscaster at all.”

“How did you know that...?” I asked him.

“Are you kidding? The whole network’s heard the story.”

Who the hell told them, damn it?

“You didn’t want to?” Tsuzuki asked.

Now, there was a faint heat to his gaze. Of course, it was nothing more than idle curiosity; I was used to people looking at me like that. And yet, for some reason...this time it made me restless. I averted my eyes.

“I originally applied for a general staff position,” I explained. “I had no particular ambition—honestly, I was just another applicant. But in the final interview with the CEO, he looked at me and said, ‘Would you be interested in a position as a news anchor?’ I was completely blown away.”

The application form and job requirements for a newscaster were completely different, so at first I thought maybe this question was my final “test.”

“And he was serious?”

“Yes, he was.”

“Maybe he could tell you had the talent for it.”

I pursed my lips and shrugged awkwardly. “Apparently none of that year’s anchor candidates had what they were looking for. When I asked him ‘why me?’ he said it was because my voiced velar nasals are very distinct.”

“Your what?”

“Basically, it’s a ‘g’ sound that passes through the nose,” Shitara cut in again. “More specifically, it’s that sort of ‘nng’ sound—I haven’t studied phonetics, so I can’t replicate it exactly. Anyway, if it’s at the start of a word, like ‘go’ and ‘get,’ then it’s just a regular voiced consonant. But ‘sing’ and ‘ingredient’ both have voiced velar nasals in them. There are other specifics, too, obviously.”

Tsuzuki cocked his head, puzzled. “So...what does it matter?”

“Well, voiced velar nasals can be grating to the ear when spoken by someone who hasn’t mastered them. You should compare your own voice with a trained professional’s—the difference may surprise you. What’s more, we’d inadvertently hired a lot of folks with slipshod articulation at the time... Did you take classes for it, Kunieda-kun?”

“No, actually. Before I got the job, I’d never given any thought to my voice at all. In fact, that interview was where I learned about voiced velar nasals for the first time.”

“Ah, I get it. So the CEO saw a diamond in the rough and pounced on it.”

“I guess so...?”

“Whoops! Looks like I’m getting a call—I gotta step outside and take this. You two eat without me.”

Unfortunately, Shitara’s absence made it a lot more difficult for me to avoid looking at Tsuzuki.

“So when the CEO or whoever told you to be a newscaster, how come you didn’t just say no?” Tsuzuki asked.

Because I wanted a job already. And they offered the best salary. And I was confident that nothing they could ask of me would make me throw in the towel.

“Well, I saw it as a personal challenge,” I said. “Plus, I was honored that an industry professional would choose me. I mean, who knows how many hundreds of applicants he must have interviewed over the course of his career?”

“Ooh, gotcha. I don’t really get the voiced nasal thing, but I do think your voice is really easy on the ears. And it’s not just that you have a ‘nice’ voice—I can tell you put a lot of work into it that the average person wouldn’t understand. You’re incredible, man.”

“No, I—”

I looked up to find Tsuzuki smiling at me softly.

As someone who was constantly put on a pedestal, compliments followed me wherever I went. Like air conditioning, they put me at ease—or at least they were supposed to. And yet for some reason, when I looked at him, my modest dissent died in my throat. My mind went blank and my face flushed red, as if my skin was somehow getting a workout from all this thinking. I’d already made the mistake of chugging my drink once tonight, and yet there I was, downing my wine in a desperate attempt to seem calm.

The hell's wrong with you? Don't give me those bedroom eyes. Not like you'd look at Owari like that... Not that that matters! God, what's wrong with me? Why can't I just play it off like normal?



Tsuzuki frowned. "Kunieda-san? You okay?"

"Hey, um..."

"What's up?"

You're Kunieda Kei, damn it! Take the reins and steer this conversation back on track! "Wh-what about you? Could you tell me what led you to your current line of work?"

"Who, me? Same as you—I just kinda stumbled into it. I always hated school, so instead I'd draw flipbooks during class. Big ones, like the size of a dictionary. And from there, one thing led to another, and here I am."

"So you're a child at heart, I take it."

"But I feel like I'll never get anywhere."

"Nonsense. I'm really looking forward to the new title sequence for *The News*."

"Thanks."

Tsuzuki smiled again, but by now I'd built up a tolerance to it, so it didn't fluster me as much. Instead, the bully in me decided to get my revenge. "How are things with your friend?"

"Huh?"

"You know, the one you mentioned the other day?"

"Oh...right. Him." Tsuzuki grinned awkwardly. Then, fed up at last, he yanked off his tie and stuffed it into his pocket. "I think he's mad at me."

"Oh?" I pressed.

"I made this total offhand comment, and...I guess it touched a nerve."

"Sounds complicated."

"Nah, it's no big deal."

Excuse me? "No big deal"? I beg to differ, asshole. I'm gonna take that tie out of your pocket and strangle you with it.

"I mean, I say he's my friend, but I only know his last name and his phone

number. And whenever I try to learn more, he just snaps at me or ignores me altogether. He probably doesn't want us to get to know each other at all... He just pops up out of nowhere, sits around my house, then wanders off again, kinda like a stray cat, and I can never tell what he's thinking."

He sounded...sad. This surprised me, and I started to feel a little guilty. He always asked for details about my life so casually, I assumed he didn't really care about the answers, but apparently I was wrong. *Well, if you were serious, then you should've acted like it! I'm not completely heartless, you know... Maybe I need to come up with a full backstory for Owari and just try to make sure I don't get mixed up.*

It was the only solution I could think of...but was it the right move? Was it what I wanted?

"You know, it's strange," Tsuzuki mused aloud as he cut up his fish. "I love working independently—or at least, I thought I did. But for some reason, just having him over at the house...hearing the flip of a page as he reads his manga, or his catty retorts at the TV... Having that stuff in the background makes working so much more fun. It's...comforting."

When I got home that night, the first thing that came to mind was: *Man, I'm hungry.*

Not that my two-hour full-course meal was on the skimpy side by any means, but it was too "classy" to have any real substance, and my mouth wanted more. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything edible in the fridge, so I donned my usual disguise and started thinking about grabbing a snack at the convenience store... when all of a sudden, my personal phone rang. I figured it was my mother again, so I answered it.

"What do you need?"

"Oh, hey, I finally got it!" said Tsuzuki on the other end of the line. I could scarcely believe my ears. "Fourth time's the charm, I guess! Maybe my brain's good at memorizing stuff after all. Soooo...are you still mad at me?"

"Excuse me?" My surprise quickly turned to anger. He was making it sound

like I was the one throwing a hissy fit for no reason!

"I'm sorry for what I said, all right?"

"Take your apology and shove it."

"That's fine. I'm not apologizing just so you'll forgive me, remember? You're the one who taught me that."

"Now I'm hyper-pissed."

"Ha ha!"

"So what do you want?"

"Wanna eat some chicken with me? Picked some up from that place I was telling you about a while back. I already had a fancy dinner, but for some reason it feels like I hardly ate."

Why did he have to have the same idea I did? I paused for a beat.

"Okay."

Unfortunately, it wasn't until I arrived that I had the world's most idiotic realization: *Damn it, how am I supposed to eat with this surgical mask on?* Luckily, there were ways around this. I took my chicken, put it on my plate, and turned away from Tsuzuki completely.

"Hey, c'mon! Are you seriously still mad at me?"

"I don't like to be watched while I eat!"

"How come?"

I thought about clapping back with something like "Do I really need a reason?" but then I remembered our conversation back at the French place and decided to embellish the truth a little. "I've got really bad snaggleteeth. Crooked as hell. That's why I wear the mask."

"Oh. I thought you were just scared of getting sick."

"That's another part of it. Anyway, just don't try to look at my mouth, all right? Not even as a joke. You'll make me...feel bad."

I almost said *make me mad*, but I figured this would be more effective.

Tsuzuki looked at me intently. "Okay."

Perfect. With my back turned to him, I sank my teeth into the saucy chicken and ascended to nirvana. It was everything I could have ever wanted, right down to the bitter burnt aftertaste. The chili oil from the spicy scallions stung my nose and made me sneeze, but I kept eating.

"Owari?"

"What do you want? I'm busy. Leave me alone."

"If you're that embarrassed about your teeth, have you ever thought about getting them fixed? It's not too late, you know...though I have heard it hurts like hell."

"Nah."

"Why not? If you're hard up for cash, I can spot you some... Oh, wait, you said you've got plenty of money. My bad."

"What? Don't lend money to a total stranger. How stupid are you?" My irritation grew pointed, like the tip of a freshly sharpened pencil. *It's a lie, okay? Don't get all bent out of shape about it. Just knock it off, dumbass.*

"You're the one who tried to give *me* money when we first met!"

"That's not the same thing and you know it. Honestly, I'm amazed you've managed to be self-employed for this long without somebody scamming you."

"I don't go around offering money to just anybody!" Tsuzuki argued. "I only offered it to you because I figured I wouldn't mind if you didn't pay me back!"

"Well, I'm *not* taking your money."

"So, what, you're just going to wear a mask for the rest of your life?"

At this point, I was seeing red.

"And what if I do?!" I shouted, my back still turned to him, flinging my used chicken skewers to the floor, where they landed without even so much as a pathetic *thump*. "Yes, I'm gonna wear a mask! For my whole life! Forever! Who cares?! What business is it of yours?!"

Then I imagined what it would be like to keep my true self buried under that fake “Kunieda Kei” mask for the rest of my life...never pausing to care about anyone but myself... The thought made me sick with dread.

Who even is Kunieda Kei? For that matter, who’s the guy Tsuzuki’s been hanging out with all this time? Who’s sitting here right now? Who the hell am I anymore?

Overwhelmed, I hiked up my surgical mask and headed for the door, but this time he grabbed me by the arm before I could make it outside.

“Just slow down a minute.”

“Don’t touch me! Let go!”

“Calm down and tell me what’s gotten into you all of a sudden!”

“I just wanna go home! You got a problem with that?!”

“No, I don’t have a problem with it. I just want to know *why*. Is it really something worth storming out over? I know it was a personal question, but don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“Screw you!”

“Owari!”

“Just shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

That’s not even my name. Then again, I’m not “Kunieda-san,” either... Wait, what? God help me, I’m falling apart.

My hair, my face, my gestures, my speech patterns, once neatly ordered like the pages of a calendar, now scattered in every direction. Why? Where did it all start to unravel? *Wait, I know.* It was that night I first met Tsuzuki. *Yeah, it’s all his fault.*

He reached up and pulled my hands away from my ears. Then I noticed his nails were splattered with dried paint, and the thought of all those soulless clay figures—and the lonely little astronaut—made tears spill down my face.

“Whoa, hey...”

“It’s your fault!”

Before now, my life was perfect. With my good looks and successful career, all I really had to do was keep quiet about one little secret. I never would've thought to make friends with someone without my persona to hide behind—and I never would've had to confront my own darkness—if only I'd never met *him*.

"Fine, I can accept that...but if you don't use your words and tell me where I'm going wrong, I can't fix it."

How can I possibly tell you? It'll ruin everything! If I told you your precious "Kunieda-san" is actually a snarky slob who's been lying to your face...that I'm every bit as hollow as your clay figures and paper mâché set pieces...you'd hate me! Revile me! Throw me out!

Pursing my lips tightly together, I silently shook my head.

His fingers clamped down around mine. "Are you sure you can't trust me? Because if you can't open up and speak your mind around me, then...why the hell do you come to my house?"

As I stood there in silence, Tsuzuki's expression twisted in a marbled mixture of anger, frustration, and sadness.

"To be fair," he said, "I started all this when I dragged you here the first night. But *you're* the one who kept coming by. Even when I ran out of tasks for you. Am I wrong in thinking you have fun hanging out with me? Because it's fun for me, too."

"Fun?" I thought I just wanted to slack off...but now that I think of it, I don't remember what the difference is.

"It's...easy," I muttered finally.

"Huh?"

"Or rather, it used to be."

"But not anymore?"

"No," I snapped. "Now it makes me think about stuff I'd rather not. And it's your fault."

"What do you mean, stuff you don't want to think about?"

“Not telling.”

“Tell me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I want to know. I want to learn more about you.”

Tsuzuki’s eyes peeked through his messy bangs—a look neither “Kunieda-san” nor “Owari” had seen before. For a moment, I found myself lost in them, admiring their beauty...and before I knew it, his face drew closer. So close I couldn’t see his eyes anymore. Then I felt the polyester fabric press up against my lips...and a beat later, I realized he had kissed me through my mask.

With just a single thin barrier between us, it highlighted just how warm and soft his lips were. I could feel his hot breath penetrate to the other side. My body shivered.



Then I felt his fingers slide behind my ear...and the second I realized he was going to take my mask off, I slapped him in the face as hard as I could.

“Agh...!”

“The hell are you thinking?! You stupid freak! I’m gonna puke!”

Then, before he could recover, I dashed outside and down the street—the fastest I’d ever run in my whole life. My heart swelled. Stung. Ached.

Good, I thought to myself. Maybe this way I’ll be too distracted to think of anything else.

The next day, as soon as I arrived at work, the chief anchor flagged me down.
“Kunieda, let me borrow you for a sec.”

“Yes, sir.”

He led me not to the break room, not to the lounge area, but to a meeting room. Instantly, I had a bad feeling about this. Clearly this was something not meant for prying ears...and yet I had no idea what it could possibly be. Not only that, but when we arrived, Shitara was waiting for us inside.

“Ah, good morning. Thanks again for coming to dinner last night.”

My suspicions deepened. “No, no, it was no trouble. Thank you for the meal.”

Shitara wasn’t alone. He was joined by the chief editor, the news director, the sales manager—all the bigwig execs, sitting in silence. But what could they possibly want with me? As I took my seat at the table, Shitara got the ball rolling.

“We’re in a bit of a bind... Oh, just so you know, this isn’t about your performance or anything. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Then why did you squirrel me away to this private room? I looked askance at the chief anchor beside me. His expression was one of utter exhaustion.

“Asou’s been hospitalized.”

“What...?”

“Early stages of stomach cancer. Thankfully, it’s not terminal, but he’ll be busy with treatment for quite a while.”

I was completely taken aback. Not that Asou was my best friend or anything, but we chatted in the break room on occasion, and he’d always struck me as being the picture of health. *What do I say? “That sounds awful”? No, that makes it sound like I barely know him... Then again, I guess I do barely know him. “Tell him I said hang in there”? No... “I look forward to his full recovery”? Honestly, these are the sorts of things I should be saying to his face, not to a third party...*

“So, in light of that,” Shitara continued before I could find the right expression of sympathy, “I was thinking of asking you to step in as our pinch hitter for the nightly timeslot.”

“What?”

“I gave it a lot of thought—well, not that I had time for a *lot* of thought—and I can’t think of a better fit than you. Your names even sound alike! Kei, Keiichi...”

“Of course, we’ll have a senior anchor there to assist you,” said the news director.

“Sorry, I need a minute.” What I really wanted to say was: *Holy shit, are you all out of your goddamn minds?* but I held it back. Then, once I plastered the words “stay calm” over every inch of my brain, I continued, “Okay, but...the evening timeslot...”

“We’ll officially promote you at the end of March,” Shitara replied casually. “Truth be told, I’d switch you over today, if I could get away with it, but they’ll need time to find your replacement. Oh, and you won’t need to worry about the Tsuzuki interview project anymore—we’ll send someone else. We’ve got about a month until broadcasting starts, so we’re running low on time. Gonna need to get you ramped up as fast as possible.”

Give me a break, old man! I can’t be the MC on your nighttime news! No way! Not happening! I looked around at the other attendees, hoping for someone to throw me a lifeline, but they just stared back at me silently with their brows furrowed and arms folded. Evidently they were convinced Shitara’s way was the only way.

“Why me? I’ve never hosted a show all on my own before. Surely there’s someone more suited to the role,” I protested gently.

“Such as?”

I didn’t have an answer to that. Out of everyone in the room, Shitara was the only one smiling like nothing was wrong, and it made me *intensely* uncomfortable.

“We don’t have a perfect replacement for Asou Keiichi. No matter who we choose, they won’t be able to match him in terms of popularity, skill, charm, or any combination of the three. But there’s no sense in mourning our lack of human resources—I’d rather take a gamble on your inner potential.”

Nice try, but I’m not falling for that. “Once Asou-san is discharged from the hospital, what will happen to me? Will I return to the evening timeslot?”

“We don’t know,” the chief editor replied gruffly...but I could read the room. It was obvious they were only *pretending* it was up in the air because they knew I wasn’t going to like the real answer.

“Instead of worrying about what’ll happen months from now, let’s focus on the four weeks ahead of us. This afternoon we’ll make a formal announcement about Asou’s condition, both internally and externally. Naturally, we’ll mention your promotion as part of that. I imagine it’ll be all over the morning papers. Now, this goes without saying, especially to a good egg like you, but going forward, you’ll need to exercise even more self-discipline whenever you’re in the public eye.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, almost robotically.

“Oh, and clear your schedule for tomorrow,” Shitara continued, pressing his palms together. “Not that you’ve done anything wrong, of course, but we’ll need to bring you along for the apology tour.”

“Apology tour? Where are we going?”

“We’ll be stopping in at the main branches of each political party. Not that they’ll actually agree to meet with us, but we gotta cover our asses, y’know? Gotta follow procedure and all that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, did I not tell you? For our first broadcast, we’re holding a special political debate, and all party leaders are invited. Have you ever met the Prime Minister in person before? No? Well, you’re in for a treat.”

In the end, this extremely one-sided “discussion” (more like a directive) ended before I had the chance to swallow—let alone digest—the new information presented to me.

When I left the meeting room, I walked with my head held high, as usual, and warmly greeted everyone I passed in the hall. Then I quietly stepped into a restroom on the far end of the studio that I knew would be empty during this time of day, locked myself in a stall, pressed the flush button on the toilet, and screamed, “Go to hell!” at the top of my lungs as I kicked the wall.

Give me a fuckin’ break! Don’t dump this shit on me! Damn it, I’m so screwed! I was being shoved out of the modest little nest I’d built for myself and told to go play housekeeper for some other guy’s ritzy mansion. I was their little minion to command as they pleased. And once the VIP was back in town, I’d be out on the street without so much as a thank you. They must’ve intentionally been looking for a mild-mannered news anchor who could survive for a few months without complaint—one that was young enough to withstand the subsequent career mishap and make a comeback later on. The phrase “sacrificial lamb” came to mind.

With an abrupt change of MC right before the start of the broadcast, right off the bat we’d lose all the viewers who were only watching for Asou Keiichi himself. Then again, maybe word would spread and a decent number would tune in on the first night out of sheer curiosity. But the night after that? And the night after that? No clue. If the show didn’t meet the station’s expectations, the blame would fall on me as a “poor casting choice,” and even if I somehow *did* pull in the numbers, I wouldn’t reap any of the rewards. I was just the standin, after all.

No matter how I looked at it, I stood to gain literally nothing from doing this. Maybe I’d be more motivated if I was the ambitious type, but I had no interest in being the station’s poster boy. It was just too much hassle. No, I was perfectly

content with a modest amount of fame and success. Why did they have to take that away from me?

It was so unfair...and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. I was just an employee—if my bosses said, "Jump," I said, "How high?" Sure, I could've put my foot down back there, but I knew if I pulled a stunt like that, I'd spend the rest of my life sitting in a chair offscreen, twiddling my thumbs. Anchors were expendable, after all. Every year they hired more fresh faces with limitless potential, making it all too easy for the higher-ups to replace people as they saw fit. Like LEGO bricks.

I pressed the flush button again and again, all the while thinking, *I want to go home. I want to rip off this stupid business suit, change into my tracksuit, and tear my hair out while I scream rage-induced profanities into the void. Then, once I work up an appetite, I want to get a beef bowl and...*

Just then, Shitara's words revived in my mind: *You won't need to worry about the Tsuzuki interview project anymore.*

Good, I thought to myself. Good riddance to bad rubbish. I never have to be around him ever again—that's the best news I've gotten all week. Now I can stop thinking about him all the time. Why the hell did he kiss me? I don't get it. It's been a full twenty-four hours and he still hasn't called me... Obviously I'd be willing to forgive him, you know, if he apologized a few dozen times and promised never to do it again. So just apologize already, damn it! Say something!

"They're all the same..."

But my whispered words were drowned out beneath the running water.

"That's a wrap, everybody!"

Once the broadcast came to an end, the studio lights dimmed and a dreary music box tune began to play. Then the producer walked in carrying a giant bouquet. *Oh, spare me the farce, would you?* I thought to myself bitterly as I stepped forward to the center of the room, as requested.

"Listen up, folks. As you all know, this is Kunieda's last night as a member of

The Evening File. Starting tomorrow, he'll be the solo MC for the late-night timeslot. It's gonna be a real challenge, but we all know you can do it! Thanks for a wonderful two years!"

Gee, thanks. What am I supposed to do with these stupid flowers? You really think a single bachelor has a vase lying around? Moron. Get me a gift card or something!

I accepted the bouquet with a cheery smile and turned to face the assistant director, who was holding a digital camera at the ready; I knew the photos he took would inevitably end up on the show's website. But even after they called it a day, the ignorant masses continued to congregate around me—asking for selfies, handshakes, and whatever else their plebeian hearts desired.

"I'm gonna watch your show every night, I promise!"

I don't need your help to inflate the ratings. "Thank you. It's been really great working with you."

"With you on board, the show's sure to be a hit!"

And you know that how, exactly? "I'll certainly try my best." Their applause grated on my ears.

Even after I slipped out of the studio, the chief anchor was waiting to ambush me. "This spring, you're gonna be a star," he told me, clapping me on the back.

Get your greasy paws off me.

"The late-night crew has had nothing but nice things to say about you, you know. Everyone says you're a quick study. Feels like our ship's in good hands with you at the helm!"

Yeah, because you'll just throw me overboard the second we start to sink.

"I gotta say, though, have you lost weight? Why don't we get you a hearty meal for dinner?"

"I appreciate the invitation, but I have a meeting to attend after this."

"Ooh, gotcha. Must be hard, being so popular! Hang in there."

Oh, shut the hell up. Swallowing my bile, I quietly imagined myself stuffing

these flowers down his throat. As I was headed to the meeting room, however, Shitara walked up to me.

“Wait a minute... I was planning to watch your last broadcast for *The Evening File*. Did I miss it?”

“I’m afraid it just ended.”

“That’s a shame! You look great with that bouquet, by the way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“That reminds me... The other day, when we went location scouting at the hospital, I noticed they had signs up saying ‘NO FRESH FLOWERS.’ Is that a new thing these days?”

“I’m not sure. So you’ll be filming at a hospital?”

“Yeah. You know how Asou has cancer? Well, we’ve been talking about doing a series on it. Capture his struggle every step of the way. Diagnosis... Modern treatment options... Patients with inadequate access to hospital care... The final stages...” He counted them all off on his fingers like he was talking about his weekend plans. “See, cancer stories tend to bring in the ratings. Doesn’t matter how many times we run ‘em. It’s a personal issue, y’know?”

I felt nothing but fear and disgust for this man standing in front of me. *You’re going to use your own employee’s illness to get views? Is everything about ratings with you?* Instantly I knew he was exactly the sort of guy who would leave me for dead the second I slipped up.

“You’re looking pale, buddy. I know you’re a strapping young man, but I’m starting to think maybe the fatigue’s getting to you. Get some rest! We can’t have you passing out next, now can we?”

But his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Miraculously, I managed to catch the last train. Inside, the cars were still covered in posters advertising Asou Keiichi’s new show, except now a sticker of my face had been added to the corner with a stupid speech bubble that said “Due to unforeseen circumstances, I’ll be taking over!” These people were

clearly hanging me out to dry. Granted, they'd explained to me that they couldn't simply reprint the posters due to cost limitations, but I could already tell that this was just another part of Shitara's scheme. Not that I necessarily wanted to star in my own poster—I just didn't appreciate the flippancy.

I closed my eyes, and the smell of the flowers intensified. *Blegh*. I could feel a migraine coming on.

Meeting after meeting. Rehearsal. Research. At the rate I was going, next month I was set to receive my biggest paycheck of all time. I used to cherish my nightly walks, but now I was so busy, I found myself allocating every last minute of my free time to sleeping instead.

The instant I arrived at home, I remembered an unfinished task and headed for the living room without even stopping to pull off my tie. I tossed the bouquet onto the sofa, then walked over and turned on my computer. It was my turn to update the stupid anchor blog, but I'd forgotten completely.

God, I hate this. Whatever—I'll just talk about my promotion or something. Let's see... "Tonight was my final night on the set of The Evening File. Over the past two years, this news program has taught me so much, and I will forever hold it near and dear to my heart. I'd like to extend my fullest gratitude to my fellow anchors and the rest of the Evening File team. Going forward, I pledge to work even harder in my new role..."

Then my phone started ringing from the pocket of my coat, which was currently lying forgotten on the floor, and I could tell from the ringtone that it was my personal line. Tsuzuki's face flashed through my mind, and I lunged for the phone so fast, it amazed me that I still had the energy to move at all. *Do you know what time it is right now? You're lucky I'm even awake right now, jackass!*

Unfortunately those complaints went unaired, because the caller was my mother.

"There you are! I've been trying to get ahold of you for days, but you haven't been picking up!"

I slowly slid off the couch to the floor. "I've been busy."

"Oh, you don't say. Are you doing okay?"

“Okay how?” I snapped. I was in such a bad mood, I was seething.

“I heard about your little promotion. Are you sure you can fill in for Asou-san? Don’t get me wrong, now; you’ve always been the resourceful type, but...I mean, shouldn’t they ask someone with a bit more experience under their belt?”

“Not my problem,” I spat. “Tell them yourself.”

“You sure you want me to do that? ‘Hello there, this is Kunieda Kei’s mother. I do believe you’ve misjudged my son’s capabilities.’ How’s that?”

“Knock it off, bimbo!”

“Don’t you talk to your mother like that!”

“Fine then, old hag!”

“Oh yeah? You think you’re so tough, hurling insults at your own mother in private where no one can see? Because I know for a fact that you’re a meek little mouse in public. I bet you smiled and said, ‘Sign me up!’ when they offered you the job, didn’t you? You’ve made your bed, now lie in it.”

“This is *your* goddamn fault, you know!”

“How in God’s name did you come to that conclusion?”

“Because you gave me this stupid handsome face! If I’d come out looking like an ugly gorilla, at least then I could’ve had a normal, ugly life! But noooo! Instead I get fawned over everywhere I go! And I don’t get the option to say no to it!”

“You’re unbelievable, you know that?! Are you seriously complaining to your mother that you’re too handsome?! Who do you think you are, young man?!”

Then I heard my father in the background: “It’s late. Keep your voice down.” But by then, my mother was too incensed to listen.

“I’m done with you! Don’t think for a minute that you can come crawling back home once the rest of the world finds out about your nasty side!”

“Good! The last thing I’d ever want is to move back in with you, bitch!”

“Both of you calm down right this minute—”

I held down the power button until my phone switched off, then slumped down onto the floor on top of my coat. *Damn it, all that shouting probably hurt my throat.* I fumbled around inside my coat pocket for a cough drop, unwrapped it, and popped it into my mouth. After all, I couldn't risk showing up on day one of the new and improved late-night broadcast with a croaky voice.

The room was silent, save for the soft *clack, clack* of the cough drop against my teeth. I couldn't stand the acrid herbal flavor, but this brand was the most effective.

That was the first time I'd heard my father's voice in quite a while... Knowing him, he was probably scolding my mother for stooping to my level right about now; then she'd push back with, "He started it!" But unlike me, she had a life partner who would always be there for her. No matter how much my mother whined and complained, my father was committed to her for life. Meanwhile, here I was, lying on the floor, just me and my cough drop.

"Good grief."

Rolling my eyes at my pathetic inner monologue, I pushed myself up into a sitting position. I had no time to waste feeling sorry for myself. I needed to finish my blog post, then do my nightly news review, then get as much sleep as I could after that, or else I'd end up with dark circles under my eyes... Just then, the bouquet caught my eye, its pale green and white color scheme, "Chosen to match your personality, Kunieda-san."

Yeah, well, it doesn't. At all.

Right from the moment I accepted it, I'd longed for nothing more than to throw it away somewhere, and yet now that it was ever-so-slightly starting to wilt, for some reason I was wracked with guilt. Unable to sit still a single second longer, I got up, erased everything I'd written on the computer, grabbed my briefcase, and stumbled out of the house.

Then I walked out to the street, made a right, passed through a little neighborhood park, then made another right at the convenience store. After a long walk, the pharmacy came into view; I made a left there and arrived at...a two story house with a rolling door out front. I didn't have a clear destination in mind when I left, so how the hell did I end up here? The second story windows

were all dark. Was he asleep? Was he out of the house? Was he in his workshop on the first floor? I knew I shouldn't have come, but I couldn't bring myself to go back home, and I couldn't think of anywhere else.

I stood there like a statue until I heard a high-pitched creak behind me. Then I looked over my shoulder and realized it was the sound of Tsuzuki's bike brakes.

"Kunieda-san...?"

He looks surprised to see me. I have to say something. I have to smooth things over like I always do.

Unfortunately, Kunieda Kei Mode didn't trigger this time. Instead, all I managed to say was a single word: "Vase."

"Vase...?"

"I was given some flowers. To celebrate my promotion. But I don't own a flower vase, and it's been hours, and now they're starting to wilt, so...I decided to go buy a vase..."

Tsuzuki's surprise shifted to visible confusion, and it was then that I realized the absurdity of what I had just said.

"Oh, no, that's not it. Never mind that. There's been a...sudden staff reassignment on the interview project, and I just...felt bad that I wouldn't get the chance to say goodbye to you..."

There. That makes more sense... Still doesn't really explain why I'm standing outside his house in the middle of the night, though, does it?

He stared at me for a moment. "Wanna come in? It's cold out here, and it doesn't look like you've got a jacket."

"I don't, no."

Weeks had passed since I last set foot in this house, and yet not a single thing had changed. Well, other than the set piece, I guess—that was finished now. Little zebra crossings ran between the skyscrapers, nearly buried under the swarm of tiny figures covering every inch of the intersection.

"So, the project's made it through the filming and editing stages?"

“Yeah. All that’s left is to have Shitara-san take a quick look at it, then do a few touch-ups in post.”

“That’s great to hear. Congratulations...or am I getting a little ahead of myself?”

“Shouldn’t I be congratulating *you*?”

“What?”

“You got a huge promotion, right? MC of your own show? That’s incredible, man. That show’s been running since I was a kid, and now I can say I’ve met the guy who hosts it. Crazy stuff.”

“Hah. Thanks.” *Great, not you too.* But I couldn’t find the energy to actually get mad at him for bringing it up.

“You must be super busy these days.”

“You could say that.” *Why are we making small talk? Is that why I wandered over here? For this?*

“Well, I’m sure they chose you because they know you can handle it.”

The hell do you think you know about me, you goddamn amateur? There’s a world of difference between reading a script and hosting an entire show on your own. From now on, not only will I have to memorize the full script, I’ll have to single-handedly balance the pacing and set the tone, plus I’ll need to play off of my guests and offer well-timed, pertinent commentary, all while making sure not to steal too much of the spotlight or disappear into the background. Worse, it’s a live broadcast, and our first night we’re having a political debate of all things! These self-important windbags are gonna ramble on and on just so they can hear themselves talk, and I’m gonna have to play moderator! No way in hell can I juggle all that!

But I didn’t breathe a word of this tirade out loud. Instead, all I said was, “That’s very kind of you to say. Everyone has been very encouraging thus far.”

“Wow, that’s incredible.” “Good on you.” “I know you can do it.” “I’m not surprised they chose you.” “I’m sure you’ll bring in the ratings.”

They’d only ever seen my perfectly manicured persona, so they all mistakenly

believed I was competent enough to handle it. None of them suspected for a moment that I was consumed by crushing anxiety...and I couldn't begin to tell them.

Even when I slept, I was cursed with nightmares in which my mind went blank in the middle of the broadcast. Every second I failed to speak, I watched as the ratings plummeted. Five more seconds and the whole broadcast will be canceled! Hurry! Five! Four! Three! Two...and that's the part where I'd always wake with a start. But I didn't have anyone I could talk to about these dreams, even jokingly. My friendships were only surface level at best—I just smiled and played nice and never got angry. I mean, think about it: being honest and vulnerable with people would only be exhausting. Not just for me, but for everyone involved.

Belatedly, my mother's words pierced me like a knife: *You've made your bed, now lie in it.*

If I admitted to Tsuzuki just how terrified I was on the inside...how would he react? Oddly enough, now that I was at my lowest, I was strangely confident that I might just manage to tear off this seemingly inescapable mask I was forced to wear. I could hear a tiny voice in my chest: *Say it. Just say it! Tell him about Owari while you're at it! Who cares anymore? Maybe once it's off your chest, you'll find the strength to carry on. This could be your last chance...*

I wanted to apologize from the bottom of my heart, and I wanted his forgiveness. If not that, then I at least wanted him to acknowledge that I was a human being with flaws like anyone else. Otherwise I couldn't keep doing this.

You said you wanted to learn more about me, right? Granted, you weren't talking to "Kunieda-san" at the time, I guess.

"I, uh—"

"Sorry," Tsuzuki cut in, holding up a hand to stop me. "I'm actually really busy right now—would you mind if I did some work? I've got a lot of little details I need to adjust by tomorrow morning. You're free to stay as long as you need to, of course."

Honestly, I should've left right then and there. But he'd essentially yanked the rug out from under me, and by the time I recovered, he'd already walked over

to his desk. One look at his face in profile and I knew from my experience as Owari that he was now too focused on his work to listen to a word I said.

Damn it, you used to swoon over your precious “Kunieda-san,” and now he’s chopped liver? What, are you done sucking up to him now that he’s off the project? You’re so stupid—you don’t even realize who you were kissing that night. Do you know how bad you fucked me up? You don’t, do you? Of course you don’t.

Having lost my opportunity to go home, I reluctantly took a seat on the sofa. The cheap synthetic leather let out a tiny squeak under my weight, and I realized just how much I had missed that sound. *Not like he’ll even look at me, so I guess it doesn’t matter,* I thought to myself as I slumped over lazily. Then I began to talk.



“Right after I got the job with Asabi TV, one of my fellow recruits—a girl—she told me they were having a get-together for the new anchors. Asked me to come.”

Sure enough, no response. *Oh well.* I shrugged to myself and continued.

“But when I arrived, everyone stared at me like...like I was a zoo animal. There were all sorts of people there—new hires from key stations and rural cable networks all over Japan. It was like a little newscaster convention in there. And for some of them, working for a major network was their life’s ambition. They’d turn down offers from other companies and keep applying for their dream job, again and again, year after year. And then I walked in—a nobody. An anomaly. I wasn’t one of them.”

Instantly I could tell they resented me. *They say you’re really talented—but y’know, even I made it to the final interview with Asabi, so.* Some of them even had the audacity to ask me if I was a nepotism hire—the son of a celebrity or a network sponsor or something. What a joke. I’m from a normal middle-class family, same as anybody else. I started from the bottom and only got this far through rigorous training.

“I never went to broadcasting school. Never joined any broadcasting club. No Olympic-class achievements on my resume. I was just chosen on a whim by someone in a position of power. You might think that sounds impressive, but when it comes down to it, it was just dumb luck. Some guy opened a door for me, and as a result, I got to skip straight to the finish line... I’d be lying if I said I’ve never regretted it. But now I can’t go back, so instead I just... If I screw up, they’ll all say, ‘Aha! This proves that he only got in through favoritism!’ So I work as hard as I can to compete with the people who actually *wanted* this job, and I’m just constantly...”

The next thing I knew, someone was shaking me awake.

“Kunieda-san? It’s 6 a.m.”

“What?!”

Instantly my blood ran cold, and I bolted upright, causing the blanket I didn’t

know I was tucked under to slide down into my lap.

“Oh...”

The moment I laid eyes on Tsuzuki, I remembered everything that had happened last night. Clearly I must have passed out at some point during my monologue. Didn’t even dream about anything—just out like a light.

“I apologize for imposing—”

“Nah, it’s my fault for being distracted with work stuff. Want some coffee?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be going home now.”

“Okay then. Real quick, before you go...” He dashed up to the second floor, then came back down carrying a terracotta vase. “This was a gift from a friend of mine who’s into pottery, but you can take it if you want.”

“Thank you...”

And so I walked across town under the faint morning light, carrying a giant flower vase. It was thick, with a wide, uneven mouth; I couldn’t really tell if it was an intentional part of the design or just poor craftsmanship. When I got home, the flowers were even more wilted...but once I got them into some water and adjusted them a bit, they seemed to regain a tiny bit of their strength, and that made me feel better.

I’ve done all I can to prepare for this—or at least, more than anyone else would’ve if they got promoted in my place, I told myself as I looked down at the script. It was 9 p.m., and the broadcast was set to start in just one hour.

“Our guest speakers are waiting in the front lobby,” called the assistant director.

“Understood.”

I rose to my feet...but Shitara stopped me. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Uhh...to greet them...?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“But—”

“That’s for the CEO and his team to worry about. Gotta put ’em to work somehow, y’know? You just keep on doing what you need to. Remember, you’re the MC! This is the Kunieda Kei show! Not saying you should lord it over people, but still—you’ve earned the right to a little swagger.”

Now I was starting to understand how this guy got shipped out to the boonies for however many years; he certainly wasn’t going to win brownie points with the higher-ups with that attitude. It was impressive, actually...but not in the “I should take a page out of his book” sort of way.

“Kunieda-san, we’re ready for you in the dressing room.”

“Sure thing.”

From the moment I arrived at work that morning, the whole station was buzzing with restless energy—people dashing in and out, increased security, the works. Hell, they were even checking for bombs in the garbage cans on the newsfloor. Everywhere I looked, I could *feel* just how important tonight’s special guests were.

Once my hair and makeup were good to go, I stepped into the studio to find the entire executive team, CEO included, standing at the ready while the technical team exchanged whispers:

“Man, I haven’t seen this kind of all-star ensemble since the lighting ceremony for the new office building.”

“Our fate’s riding on this thing—in more ways than one. If we screw this up, they might just revoke our broadcast licenses!”

“Dude, not funny!”

I squinted against the light. *Was the studio always this bright? Almost like there’s nowhere for me to hide...not that they’d let me hide in the first place. This is “the Kunieda Kei show,” remember? That means I have to handle it all myself.*

At 10 p.m., I was going to have to sit in the host’s seat for the next solid hour. And no matter how I begged or pleaded, no one would take over for me...

Suddenly, the black camera cables on the floor looked like writhing snakes, and goosebumps pricked up my arms. I'd never felt this way in all my career. There were eight cameras, cranes included—twice as many as the evening timeslot. Eight large eyes, all focused on me. Plus, my image would be broadcast across all of Japan in real time. Hundreds...no, *thousands* of eyes, all on me...and no matter what catastrophic mistakes I made, I would never be able to escape them... Sweat began to bead on my forehead.

Quit letting your imagination get carried away. Don't think about all the ways you could screw up; it'll be fine. The title sequence will play for fifteen seconds. Then the cameras will pan over the set. Close-up on me—that's my cue. "Good evening..." Okay, and then what? Wait...what do I say after that?

"Pardon me."

I walked over to a long table in one corner of the studio and attempted to grab the script sitting there, but couldn't quite reach. Fortunately, the assistant director was standing right there. He picked it up and handed it to me. "Is everything okay?"

"Just need to borrow it, thanks."

My hands were trembling as I accepted the stapled stack of papers. This was the most nervous I'd ever felt at work—even more than on my first day on the job.

Relax, would you? Just read the script. "Good evening. Welcome to The News. Starting tonight, we're bringing you an all-new show, and for our inaugural broadcast, we've invited Japan's most distin...uishe... poli...cal lead...s to spea... with us. Joi...after th...com...ercial brea...to hear thei...akes on a...ide varie...of topics..."

But no matter how hard I tried to read it, it refused to stick. It felt like I was trapped inside another one of those nightmares—mind blank, spotlight on me—except this time, it was real.

"Pardon me, but we need to get you miked up here shortly," said a member of the sound crew, holding up a clip-on mic.

No! I retreated a few steps back.

“Uh...?”

“Oh, er...I apologize, but I’d like to use the restroom one last time, if that’s all right.”

“Go for it.”

As I stepped out of the studio into the empty hallway, I could feel my fake smile falling apart. I headed upstairs to the men’s restroom, and no sooner had I locked myself in a stall than the trembling in my hands spread across my entire body. My teeth chattered uncontrollably.

I’m too scared. I can’t do this. I can’t! Maybe I could submit my resignation and then fly to a different country and wait it out until it all blows over? Maybe my appendix could spontaneously rupture? Maybe an escaped criminal could run into this bathroom and beat me into a coma? Or maybe an arsonist could set a teeny tiny fire in the building—you know, make us all evacuate, but nobody dies? That kind of fire?

But not even my best escapist fantasies could stop the clock from ticking. 9:40 p.m. If I didn’t hurry back to the studio, the team would start to panic...but my legs refused to cooperate. As I stared down helplessly at the clock on my phone, the screen timed out and went dark, so I hastily clicked it back on again. This process repeated for a full minute. Then another.

God, what do I do? Damned if I do, damned if I don’t... Well then, I might as well not go back, right? But if I stay here, they’ll find me sooner or later...and there’s no way I can sneak out of the station...but...but...

Then the screen went dark again—but this time it immediately lit back up, buzzing loudly, the red “incoming call” light flashing like crazy.

“Whoa!”

It was such eerily perfect timing, I let out a small scream. Then I saw the number displayed onscreen and froze—but then I thought, *Screw it. It can’t get any worse than this.* So I answered it.

Actually, on second thought... Deep down, maybe I was *hoping* this would happen. That would certainly explain why I bothered bringing my personal phone to work today instead of leaving it at home like I normally do.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just wondering how you’re doing these days,” Tsuzuki replied, as though he’d completely forgotten what happened between us the last time he saw...uh...Owari. “I finally finished my project, so I’m free from work for a while. It’s gonna air on TV here any minute now, so you might wanna turn yours on.”

I wanted to scream at him—*Don’t talk to me as if nothing ever happened! You have no idea how you made me feel!*—but instead, all that came out was a tiny plea.

“Help me.”

“Sure thing,” he replied casually. “I’ll be right there. Where are you right now?”

I fell silent. Obviously I couldn’t tell him, no matter what kind of crisis I was having.

He sighed. “Not this crap again... Why are you always like this? Why can’t you just open up to me?”

“Because!”

Trust me, I would tell you if I could. You’re the only one on this planet I’d be willing to tell...and that’s exactly why you’re the last person I’d want to find out. Which side of me is it that’s so obsessed with you, anyway?

“Fine, whatever,” he replied. “Look... The guy I love once told me that the more stressed you are, the more important it is that you carry on like normal.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe you should give it a try. Just turn on the TV and watch, okay?”

The guy he loves?

With those parting words, Tsuzuki hung up on me, leaving me to my misery. At first I was furious that he would abandon me like that...but then I thought of something.

Fumbling with the lock, I staggered out of the bathroom stall and started running—down the stairs and back into the studio. I could feel everyone turn to

look at me, their eyes stabbing into me like daggers, but I ignored them.

“Kunieda! Where the hell—” the news director began, but I ignored him, too.

“Now, now. Let’s not be too hard on our star performer on opening night, shall we?” said Shitara in a half-assed attempt to mollify the angry bigwig.

Meanwhile, I walked over to the long table and did my “normal” thing: I picked up my forgotten intonation dictionary and quietly opened it to the first page.

There, in the bottom right corner, was a rough pencil sketch of my face; it was cartoony in style, and yet somehow it still managed to capture me perfectly. Belatedly, I found myself impressed at Tsuzuki’s artistic prowess. He must’ve drawn it in secret while I was asleep—that was the only explanation I could think of.

I flipped to the next page and found another drawing, identical to the first. Same with the next page. And the page after that, and the page after that... Then I pressed my thumb hard against the edge of the book and started flipping through the pages at high speed. As I watched, the drawings that I thought were “identical” slowly started to shift. My winning smile slowly faded into a steely blank stare; a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses appeared alongside a surgical mask; and my hair steadily grew more and more unkempt.

“What...?”

I mouthed the words, “You knew?” down at the dictionary. *Since when? Why didn’t you say anything?* You’d think this revelation would have terrified me, and yet the little doodle was so heartwarming that I felt the urge to suppress a laugh.

“Um... Sorry to bother you, but...your mic...”

“Oh, my apologies. Right you are. Go for it.”

I can’t believe he used my damn dictionary like a drawing pad. Once I’m out of here, I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind. Yeah... Even if I ruin the whole broadcast and have to flee my home country, he’s the one person I’ll need to say my goodbyes to.

“Standby, sixty seconds.”

The words echoed across the studio. I closed my dictionary, set it back on the table, and stepped into the bright light.

Behind me, I heard Shitara call out to me: “Don’t worry about getting it perfect, all right? No one expects that.”

“Well, you should,” I replied without missing a beat. “I’ve been doing this for a while now, and ‘Perfection’ is my middle name.”

I couldn’t see his face, but I thought I felt him smirk at me.

“All right, then—let’s see you nail it better than anyone could.”

I sat down in the host’s chair. To my left was an empty table, its chairs waiting to be filled. *This is my show*, I thought to myself as I took a deep breath. *I may be nothing but a standin, but I’m still in charge. I don’t care who walks onto my stage, be it a party president, the Prime Minister, or even the Emperor. On this set, I’m the MC. The Master of Ceremonies.*

9:59:50 p.m.

“Ten seconds...nine...eight...seven...six... Five seconds...”

From there, the rest of the count was carried out silently, with fingers only. And at 10 p.m. exactly, I leaned forward slightly and peered into the on-air monitor positioned precisely within the cameras’ blind spot. Onscreen was a bird’s-eye view of a city, with crowds of people—by which I mean Tsuzuki’s clay figures—swarming between tall buildings. Then it panned out to the astronaut, looking down upon his distant ancestors as he shed a single fat tear...that is, until another astronaut gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

Whoa. That wasn’t in the original storyboards.

The two astronauts exchanged a nod, and then the spaceship flew off into the stars as the logo for *The News* faded in. If I asked him why he added a second astronaut, would he still shrug and say he just felt like it? That there was no deeper meaning behind it?

Damn it, why do I wish he was here?

“Good evening.”

I smiled into the camera. Then I checked my bust shot in the monitor and silently gave myself a little pat on the back.

Best one yet.

“Thus far, we’ve heard your thoughts on job security and the unemployment rate. Let’s move on...”

Is this a dream? I wondered idly. It all felt so surreal.

“Next, we’ll be discussing potential countermeasures to the falling birthrate—but first, let’s watch the following clip.”

As the video played, I contemplated who to address first.

First, I should start with the people who have actual experience drafting legislature on this topic. Then the guy who flipped his lid over government childcare subsidies will probably want to complain, so I’ll give him a couple minutes to say his piece. After that, I’ll need someone who’s less emotionally invested to bring the conversation back down... We’ll need to address preschool waiting lists, too; I’ll give the women priority on this one.

Then the video ended and the show resumed. Meanwhile, I arranged and rearranged my guest stars like building blocks in my mind. Stacked them up, knocked them down, stacked them up again.

“So, if I were to sum up your arguments from my perspective...”

Camera 4 centered on the table, followed by a wide shot from camera 8 on the crane. Fifteen seconds of footage from the most recent House of Representatives election, then back to the studio.

As the show progressed, I quickly gained an understanding of the camerawork involved, as well as which shots would be used for the broadcast. As I recited my lines, it almost felt like I was switching out the feeds myself through sheer telekinesis. Was I having an out-of-body experience? Everything seemed to be connected by invisible threads...and the power was in my hands.

Whenever I replied to one of my guests, the words came to me naturally. Poll results, party seats, party platforms...I didn’t even need to pause to think about

it.

Yeah, this must be a dream...because for the first time in my life, I'm actually having fun doing my job.

10:23 p.m.

The show was progressing smoothly—everyone was invested in the conversation, and there was a good back-and-forth going. So far, no major mistakes. The only problem on my mind was the upcoming commercial break.

No matter how heated the arguments got, we still had to cut to commercials—that's TV broadcasting for you. But this next commercial was a long one, clocking in at two and a half minutes. Misjudge the timing and it could impact the discussion or even cost us viewers. But we were already three minutes overdue, and I was running out of wiggle room. Nobody was looking at the cue cards, and the floor manager's frustration was palpable. I needed to steer the conversation to a good cut-off point.

Guess I'll just have to do this the hard way. "I hate to interrupt, but it's time for a word from our sponsors."

That should have been enough, but unfortunately, it wasn't.

"We're having a very important discussion right now!" one of the party leaders roared back at me.

In terms of house seats, his party was a small minority, but after decades spent working in politics, this old man was more than opinionated enough to make up for it. Everyone had warned me in advance that he'd be tricky to deal with.

"We're trying to talk about tax hikes. If you're not going to contribute to the conversation, then just sit there and shut up!"

Not contributing? Who the hell do you think you're talking to? I inhaled ever so slightly, so the cameras wouldn't pick it up.

"I understand *exactly* how important this discussion is," I said. "The thing is, I find your arguments to be flimsy at best."

One of the other guests let out a snicker. That *really* set the guy off. “I beg your pardon? Then perhaps you need to do some research!”

“Are you sure about that? I may be the host of this debate, but at the end of the day, I’m an ordinary citizen; on election day, I go to the polls and cast my vote, same as anyone else. So as a representative of the people, I must ask: is it your party’s policy, then, to write off any opinions you don’t like by claiming they come from a place of ignorance?”

“I never said that!”

“Well then, could you explain it to me? Prior to the election, your party manifesto called these tax hikes ‘unavoidable.’ But after a dramatic decrease in house seats, your official position flipped a full 180 degrees. To the average person, it would appear as though you’ll say anything to stay elected—is that correct?”

“Excuse me?! I find that notion extremely offensive!”

The mood in the room was now dangerously tense. Some of the staff members were openly concerned; hell, even I was mildly terrified of what I’d done. I was just trying to push for a commercial break, and now this? How was I supposed to recover?

And yet, for some reason, I felt excited in equal measure. *Just look at him boiling with rage! Now this is good television! Cameras, get a close-up!*

“By all means, please explain to me how a tax increase is unnecessary,” I continued. “It’s extremely unlikely, arguably *impossible*, to make up for the massive deficit simply by cutting funding for public services. Don’t believe me? Just look at the budget proposal for next year—”

“I’ve had enough of you! I’m leaving!”

The old man jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair. But I knew a single second of hesitation would cost me my victory, so I immediately turned to the assistant director and said: “Someone get this man a teddy bear and a nap.”

Go! Now!

And at that exact moment, I saw the monitor switch over to a commercial for

a soft drink.

“Commercial break!”

Whew. I rose to my feet and bowed deeply. “I am so sorry for what I said.”

The next instant, the grumpy old politicians all burst out laughing.

“Don’t be! You had him on the ropes!”

“Yeah, what he said. That old man loves to grandstand for attention.”

“Tell me about it! You could tell he knocked his chair over on purpose!”

“The little dogs always bark the loudest. And shows like these are the only time anyone from his party gets to be on TV.”

I had assumed the man in question was going to tear me a new one, but instead he sat there red-faced and simply stuck his tongue out at me. “You’re welcome for the ratings,” he scoffed. “I’ll expect a bottle of booze delivered to my office.”

Well played, sir. For as frustrated as I was, I couldn’t help but laugh as I returned to my seat. “I’ll be sure to tell my producer.”

After the final commercial break, it was time for today’s news headlines, then a sports update. These were both handled by other anchors.

“Next up, let’s take a look at the weather.”

After exchanging a few lines with the meteorologist standing in the plaza out in front of the TV station, we covered the cherry blossom forecast, pollen levels, what to wear for tomorrow’s weather... Then, at 10:57:50 p.m., the ten seconds left cue went up, and sure enough, ten seconds later, the ending theme began to play.

“Tune in this time tomorrow, and I’ll see you again. Until then.”

I gave one final smile, and...scene. Then I fell into a slight coughing fit, and the assistant director rushed over with some water.

“I’m sorry! I wanted to bring you some during the commercial break, but Shitara-san told me it would break your concentration, so...”

“That’s all right.”

In the end it didn’t matter, since I managed to stick it out for the whole broadcast. Still, one sip and it quickly became apparent just how parched I was. In a blink, I’d inadvertently downed the whole cup.

“Hell yeah. That’s the stuff,” I exhaled, and a moment later I realized I’d spoken not as Kunieda Kei, but myself.

Oh crap. I looked around...and found everyone in the studio staring blankly back at me. Panic spiked in my chest. *Why aren’t they saying anything? Did I screw something up and not get the memo?* The room was quieter than it had any right to be, especially immediately after a broadcast.

And the first thing to break the silence...was Shitara, loudly clapping his hands. Then a second person joined in. Then a third. Then the camera operators...then the assistant director...the hairstylist...the makeup artist...the sound crew...the lighting crew...the camera assistants... This broadcast could never have happened without each and every one of them. Likewise, they had all watched me work, praying from the bottom of their hearts that I would pull it off like I promised I would.

Surrounded by a seemingly endless standing ovation, I bowed deeply. “Thank you so much.”

“All right, folks! Let’s break for thirty minutes, then come back together in the meeting room for the evaluation meeting,” called Shitara. Then he walked up to me. “That was better than I ever could have imagined,” he gushed with the sort of fervor I didn’t even know he was capable of.

“What were you imagining, then?”

“Eh, it doesn’t matter. Anyway, the CEO’s headed out to a dinner party with our esteemed guests. Want to pop in for a bit?”

“I’ll leave that to the big fish,” I answered. “I need to be present for the evaluation meeting. Plus, I’d like to watch tonight’s recording and double-check a handful of things. That way I can perform even better tomorrow night.”

“We’re counting on you, champ.”

We talked until dawn, discussing tiny details that 99.9 percent of viewers probably wouldn't give a crap about one way or the other, like whether the subtitles should be a darker blue, or whether the camera should zoom in for an extra second after the end of the title sequence. But we industry professionals made up that last 0.1 percent, and that was why it was our job. Even Tsuzuki's films had to start from a single frame of storyboard.

It was my first time sleeping on a sofa at the office, and I awoke to find something light and papery draped over my face. I could smell the faint scent of ink... Did someone use my face as a garbage can? Because this sure as hell wasn't much of a sleep mask. For a second I forgot myself and grimaced openly, but fortunately, my newfound shield safely concealed it.

Propping myself upright, I pulled the paper away from my face...and realized a man was standing in front of me. Not only that, but I was surrounded by people passed out facedown on their desks. *Anyway, who is this guy again? I know I recognize him... Pretty sure he's an editor... Whatever. He's definitely senior to me, so I'd better be polite.*

"Good morning," I blurted out, bowing my head in apology. "I apologize for conking out like that."

"Oh, no worries. That was one hell of a show last night, so if anyone's earned the right to pass out, it's you. Anyway, take a look."

He indicated the paper, so I followed his suggestion and examined it. "Oh...!"

"Congrats."

It was a ratings chart, the kind the editorial team printed out whenever a show hit its target. The average viewership was listed as 23.5%...and our share was 28%.

"With those numbers, the program overhaul is off to a great start."

"Thank you..."

"You'll notice viewership peaked at 25%, right before a commercial break, at approximately 24 and a half minutes in. Right around the time you made that

‘teddy bear’ quip.” He grinned wryly, then cautioned, “Funny as it was, for a news anchor, that comment was cutting it pretty close. Try to act edgy and you’ll just dig a hole for yourself; the viewers will lose interest pretty quickly. I know it can be tricky, but for tonight’s show, let’s try to keep things ‘business as usual.’”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pass that chart on to Shitara, would you? He should be back any minute.”

“Where did he go?” I asked.

“To the hospital,” was all he said in reply.

A short while later, Shitara walked in. His gait was so light, you’d think he wasn’t tired at all. When he spotted me, he smiled. “Morning.”

“Good morning, sir.” I handed him the ratings chart.

“Interesting,” he replied, but he didn’t actually sound all that surprised.

“Were you expecting something higher...?”

“No, no. These numbers are astounding! Let’s go whine at the editorial team until they give us a little performance bonus. Drinks are in order!”

Shitara spun on his heel and promptly stuck our “astounding” results to the wall...with packaging tape. Like it was a child’s drawing.

“I heard you were at the hospital this morning,” I called after him. “I assume you were visiting someone?”

“Asou, obviously. What a prima donna, am I right?” He shrugged playfully.

“Huh...?”

“He called me first thing in the morning to demand I bring him a DVD of last night’s show ASAP. Apparently he was watching last night and got intimidated by your ‘youthful energy’ or something. Told me, ‘Oh, he wasn’t bad, but I could’ve done a lot better. Once I’m out of the hospital, you’d better give me my job back!’ I tell ya, all that shouting probably scared the cancer right out of his body. Just what the doctor ordered, am I right?” He turned and looked at

me. “Thanks again,” he finished, his tone uncharacteristically sentimental.

“Oh, er...of course, sir.”

“What, you didn’t think I’d thank you? Do I look like the kind of vulture who would take advantage of a guy’s illness for the views? Gimme a break, kid. Just so we’re clear, it was Asou himself who wanted us to cover it, all right? The guy’s terrified of losing the limelight for even a second. He’s married to the job.”

I could never be like that, I thought to myself. I’m not that ambitious—I’m just a jack of all trades. Plus, I lead a double life...but at least Tsuzuki seems to accept me... Well, I should probably ask him and make sure.

Outside the station, I climbed into a taxi. “You the guy from last night’s news?” asked the driver.

Congrats, you have eyes. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I saw your show last night! It was great!”

“Thank you.”

“Is that stuff all scripted, or what?”

“The world may never know.”

Shut the hell up and drive, would you? I hissed internally, as I always did...but for some reason, I wasn’t actually in a bad mood. I checked my phone, hoping to find a message from Tsuzuki, but no such luck. I did, however, find an e-mail from my mother that read: *Great work, hon.*

And for once, I actually replied: *Thanks, Mom.*

The taxi pulled up outside Tsuzuki’s house, and I stepped out. Glancing around furtively, I took out the spare key I’d forgotten to give back and quietly let myself in. It was pitch dark, so I headed up to the second floor, where I found Tsuzuki sound asleep in his bed.

Unsure what to say, I slowly approached him. Then the floor let out a loud creak under my weight, and he opened his eyes.

“Which one are you...?”

“What?”

“Are you Kunieda-san, or are you Owari?”

I thought for a moment. “About half and half, I guess.”

“Right.” He laughed. “Took you long enough. I tried to wait up for you, but I passed out around 8 a.m.”

“Not my fault, damn it. It’s my job.”

“Feels weird to hear you cuss in your Kunieda clothes.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Have you been online? There’s a new article going around about you: *The Prince of Asabi TV Adds a Shade of Sadism to His Persona.*”

“Gimme a break.”

My first reaction was, *Pay attention to the show, you idiots*, but upon further reflection, this kind of gossip was probably bound to happen...and right now, I had bigger fish to fry.

“So...how long have you known?”

“The hell are you thinking?! ”

“Huh?”

“You stupid freak! I’m gonna puke!” Tsuzuki continued in his best impersonation of me.

“You really still mad about that...?”

“No! I mean, yeah, I am. But when you slapped me, it cleared my mind...and that’s when I heard it. Your...voiced velar nasals.”

“Oh...”

“I remembered what Shitara-san said about ‘nng’ sounds...and then it hit me. Kunieda-san told me he’d never been consciously aware of the way his voice sounded—which meant he probably couldn’t consciously conceal it, either. And once I started to examine it, all the pieces fell into place. Honestly, I’m baffled I

didn't figure it out sooner. You really didn't do much to disguise yourself at all, other than your clothes and your bad attitude! Hell, even your sneeze is the same! First I heard it when you were filming as Kunieda-san, and then I heard it when you came over for chicken. It's the exact same!"

"Why didn't you confront me about it...?"

"Well, I thought maybe you had something like dissociative identity disorder —y'know, like, maybe your two personalities didn't share memories or something. Now I see that's not the case."

I sighed and sat down on the bed with my back turned to him. "Aren't you pissed at me?" I asked in a small voice.

"Why would I be?"

"Because I lied to you for a long-ass time."

"You didn't lie to me. I never asked about it, so you never had the chance to be honest. The way I see it, we were both keeping something from each other, so we're even."

"Seriously? That's it?"

"Yeah, that's it. What's wrong with that?"

"Well..." It took a lot of courage for me to admit—out loud—that my behavior was abnormal. "Isn't it...you know...creepy? And a major red flag?"

"Not really."

I whirled around and glared at him. "This is a serious question, damn it!"

"Look, man, I don't know what you want me to say." He smiled awkwardly. "I'm telling you, it's not a problem. I really don't understand why you're so mad about it."

"Because!"

"Honestly, this works out great for me." He hopped to his feet, bedsprings creaking audibly, and as I swayed slightly from the vibrations, he reached out and scooped up a strand of my bangs. "See, I was on the cusp of falling for both Prince Kunieda-san *and* Owari the Grump. But this way, I don't have to cheat on

anyone.”

“How the hell could anyone fall for both?”

“You’d be surprised. It’s like eating chocolate and potato chips at the same time.”

“That analogy makes no sense.”

I smacked his hand away from my face, but mostly just because I was too embarrassed to react rationally. And I could tell from the mischievous look in his eye that he had already picked up on this.

“Most people have another side to ’em, obviously, but usually it’s not quite so...distinct. What a fascinating specimen I have here.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m some kind of endangered species.”

“Oh, but you are.”

He stole a tiny kiss—so quick I could barely feel it, much less put up resistance. Then his lips drew near a second time, and I could feel his hot breath against my skin.

“Watching you on TV gave me butterflies, you know.” He slid his fingers behind my head and played with my hair. “I was worried at first, but as soon as your face popped up on screen, I knew you were gonna be just fine. And sure enough, you handled it all on your own! One minute you’re falling apart under all the pressure, and the next minute you’re cracking jokes like you own the place. It was so sexy, I fell in love...all over again.”

“I didn’t handle it all on my own,” I whispered. Was my breath just as hot as his? “If you hadn’t called me when you did, I probably would’ve chickened out. For the first time in my life, I felt alone...and for the first time, I realized I truly wasn’t.”

“Kei...” That was the first time he ever addressed me by my given name. “You don’t have to change. Stay exactly the way you are. Let me be the only one who knows the real you.”

“I mean...that’s the plan. If anyone else finds out about the real me, my life is over.”

“Is that your way of saying you want to be with me?”

Is it...? But he's a guy... Then again, if I let this one get away, who knows if I'll ever find another oddball who can accept me for who I am...

“Yes,” I replied in a tiny voice, “but just half.”

“Half yes from each half of your personality? Well then, that adds up to a full yes.”

“No, just *half*! I'm sure you're only half in love with each half of me, anyway!”

“You dumbo,” Tsuzuki laughed.

You'd think I'd get mad at him for calling me names, but no. Instead, I got mad at myself for not getting mad about it...

“I'm all the way in love with both sides of you. That's *double* the yes.”

...and for letting a cheap line like that actually work on me.

He pulled me by the hand, guiding me to straddle his legs in a kneeling position. This was less embarrassing than letting him climb on top of me, but not by much. Then my jacket and tie ended up in a crumpled heap on the floor, and it quickly became apparent where this was headed. We were both grown adults, after all.

“You know, if you're scared, we can save it for next time,” he said.

“Excuse me? I don't think so! Once you've had a taste of this, you'll be under my spell. No one else will ever compare.”

“Oh no! I'd *hate* that!”

“Damn right!”

“Dumbo. You've never heard of reverse psychology, have you?”

“What's *that* supposed to mean?!”

“It means sign me the hell up.”

He pressed his lips to my chest through my shirt—or rather, *shirts*, since I was wearing a T-shirt under my button-up. The sensation was tantalizing, like that kiss through my surgical mask; the memory made my face flush.

“Mmm.”

There was a rough scraping sound, like a cat’s tongue, and I realized Tsuzuki was licking the fabric. Slowly but surely, his saliva seeped in until I felt its faint warmth against my bare skin. Then he dragged his teeth lightly over the cloth—I could feel the tiny vibration against my nipples.

“Aah...”

Mine were (obviously) much smaller than a woman’s, so you’d think he’d have had trouble locating them right away, and yet his mouth suctioned around one with pinpoint accuracy. My breath hitched in my throat. Desperate for something to hold onto, I wrapped a hand around the closest thing I could find, which was his head. In response, he slid his arms tightly around my waist and started sucking even harder. Then a tiny spark of pain shot through me, and I reflexively yanked him by the ear.

“Stop it, stupid!”

“Ow! Don’t rip my ear off!” He looked up at me and made a show of pouting his lips. “I thought you were gonna ‘put me under your spell.’”

“I will.”

“Then kiss me.”

How about a “please”? His demanding tone irked me, but then he closed his eyes and puckered his lips, and he looked so adorably vulnerable trapped beneath me that I went ahead and did as requested.

Unfortunately, he only behaved himself for about ten seconds before he started pushing his luck. Sliding his tongue into my mouth, he traced along my teeth before pulling away slightly, leaving only a thread of saliva to connect us.

“I’m glad you don’t actually have snaggleteeth,” he whispered.

“Of course I don’t,” I shot back, but the more I thought about that stupid lie, the more guilty I felt, and I couldn’t bear to say “sorry” out loud, so instead I kissed him again. This time I initiated the tongue, but I wasn’t consciously seducing him—my body was simply acting on its hunger, devouring his mouth relentlessly without even letting him pause to take a breath. Meanwhile, he slid

his fingers up my back.

“Mm...nnn!”

A faint jolt of electricity shot like a meteor across my entire body, and my back arched. I glared at him, but he simply grinned back at me like the Cheshire Cat, enjoying my exaggerated reactions. When I tried to pull away, he sapped my remaining strength with his tongue until I went weak in the knees. Then he hiked up my shirt and started caressing my tailbone—almost like he was tickling the bone directly. It drove me crazy.

“Mmn...!”

Next he undid my belt, unzipped my fly, and grasped my exposed half-mast. Part of me found his utter lack of hesitation mildly terrifying, while another part of me found it a reassuring sign that he sincerely didn’t mind if I was male. What about me, though? Was I only okay with it because I was on the receiving end? Then again, I *was* kissing him pretty passionately. If his mouth was a Tootsie Pop, I would’ve reached the chocolate by now.

“Aah...!”

When we finally pulled apart, he moved to my neck, and moans slipped unbidden from my newly freed lips. Experimentally, I licked them, and found that our lengthy makeout had left them aching faintly, like a mosquito bite.

Meanwhile, Tsuzuki’s large hand moved roughly yet deftly, following my smallest reactions like a road map to maximize my pleasure.

“Aaah...aah...aaahh!”

At first I didn’t want to finish too quickly, lest it look like I was too eager...but once clear fluid started to leak from my tip, I kind of stopped caring what I looked like.

“Aah! Aah...mmm!”

I didn’t notice him fumbling around near his pillow with his free hand. Nor did I notice him reaching around behind me. All I could think was: *I wanna cum. God, I wanna cum in his hand right now—*

“Aah!”

His fingers slid into my underwear and right between my cheeks. I flinched at the wet sensation against my skin.

“No...!”

“Ooh, I love it when you try to hold back.”

“Go to hell! Seriously, what was that?”

“Lotion,” he answered. “I have really bad dry skin, so I always put some on before bed.”

I was glad to know the mystery substance wasn't anything toxic, but if I were to sum up the sensation of his slimy fingers sliding into me in a single word, that word would be: *horrifying*.

You're not going to stick it in there, are you? No way. Why would I want to do that? Look, I'll jerk you off instead. Hell, I'll even use my mouth if I have to! Anything but that!

But before I could get the words out, I felt something foreign wriggling around inside me, and it stopped me in my tracks. One of his fingers was buried up to the knuckle, feeling the walls of my rectum, and somehow my brain was terrified it might somehow reach through my whole body and into my skull.

“Stop...” Reflexively, I wrapped my arms tightly around his head.

“Just focus on this part,” he replied, working my member a bit more intensely now that it had started to wilt.

“Aah! Nn...aah...aah...”

“Feels good, doesn't it?”

“Nnn...!”

His finger slid in and out in sync with each stroke. I stiffened up at the uncomfortable sensation, but he didn't fight me; instead he continued his frontal caress, waiting for me to lower my guard.

“Nnnn... Ngh! Aah!”

“See?”

“Aaah! Which...part are you talking about...?”

“Both.”

Then the answer is no. I shook my head.

“No?” he asked casually, like we were discussing the weather.

“Nnn... Who the hell would...enjoy your fingers up there?!”

“Good god, you’re so vanilla.”

“No, *you’re* a degenerate!”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

“Aah!”

Right when I was getting used to having the one intruder in my back door, he added a second.

“No...!”

“You’re only going to make it harder on yourself if you hyper-focus on it.”

“I can’t help it!”

“Sure you can. C’mon.”

“Aaahh...!”

He rubbed the underside of my hard cock until more translucent fluid dribbled out from the tip, slicking up his fingers. There was a wet squelching sound coming from behind as I slowly loosened up. Did my insides turn to putty or something? The thought was frightening, and yet the pleasure in front made it hard to want to stop. My head peeked out from under my foreskin, pink and swollen, as Tsuzuki’s vigorous strokes made my lower body jiggle.

“I can feel you getting tight back here, so it must be working.”

“Liar!”

“It’s the truth!”

A dull pain shot through me as his fingers sank all the way inside and attempted to spread me apart. This was a pleasure I had never known, and I could feel my entrance clamping down on him. Yearning.

“No! Aah...aaaahhh...!”

Meanwhile, my member reached its limits, and I climaxed so hard I saw stars. As I clung to him, he pulled me down onto the mattress. Then he whipped his shirt off, and for a moment I stared up at his exposed upper body with hazy eyes. But when he yanked my pants off, underwear and all, and slid in between my bare legs, I couldn't help but find my fear once more.

"Wait...I...I can't do this."

"Little too late for that, don'tcha think?"

"No, really—let's do something else. Don't put it in me."

"Convenient how you change your tune now that *you* got to cum."

Hoisting up my resisting legs, he pressed the tip of his length at my entrance, and instantly I could tell he was hard as diamonds and in no mood to negotiate. Unfortunately, although I could empathize, I still couldn't let it happen.

"Tsuzuki-san..."

"Huh?"

"Tsuzuki-san, please don't. I'm scared," I pleaded in my Kunieda Kei voice. He faltered and hung his head. *Ooh, did it work?*

"You're evil, you know that?"

"We'll try again another day, all right?"

Now that I was spared (for today, at least), I reached out to softly touch his shoulder...but instead he grabbed my hand and pinned it against the mattress.

"Ow!"

"I'm gonna straighten you out...the hard way."

Crap. My plan had backfired. "I thought you said you liked me just the way I am!"

"Yeah, well, even I have my limits. And I don't appreciate you toying with my heart."

"It's not my fault you're so obsessed with me—*hey!* I said no!"

"Then I'll meet you in the middle: I'll only put it in halfway."

“Same difference!”

“Oh, shut up. I love you, okay?”

“Gee, thanks.”

As a fellow man, I could tell from the slightest touch that his erection could not be quelled. Truth be told, I was less concerned about the potential pain and more concerned about what this was going to do to me mentally.

“Don’t! Ow... That hurts!”

I decided to exaggerate my pain a bit, and sure enough, his expression clouded over. This was precisely what I was aiming for, and yet it made *me* hesitate, too.

“I’m sorry...” He reached out and gently stroked my cheek.

Reflexively, I averted my gaze. “Oh, no, it’s fine.”

“So you were lying?”

“What? No!”

He pushed against me more firmly, and my toes clenched.

“I’m not gonna keep falling for that crap.”

“I’m not lying! It really does hurt!”

“Yeah, well, it’ll hurt worse if you don’t settle down.”

“Nngh...”

“Take deep breaths, nice and slow.”

I didn’t enjoy taking orders from him, but I didn’t really want to make this harder on myself, so I did as I was told. Each time I exhaled, he slid in another fraction.

“Agh... That’s half, right...?”

“Not yet.”

“Liar! Hey, don’t touch that!”

“See? Isn’t this easier?”

He reached for my flaccid shaft. Considering I had only just cum, I sincerely doubted I could get hard again—and yet, to my disbelief, the memory of my last toe-curling orgasm was apparently all it took to resuscitate my cock.

“No... Don’t... Aaahh!”

I could feel him working my lust into a lather in the palm of his hand, appeasing my body’s fears and in turn loosening my entrance.

“Kei...”

“Aah...aah...nnng...!”

“Sorry...I can’t take it anymore.”

“Aah!”

Once my tip started to leak again, Tsuzuki thrust his hips, and my sight pitched sideways as though the impact had struck my skull instead of my pelvis. Tears trickled from my eyes, almost like he was pushing them out of me from the bottom up.

“Nngh...”

“Hey.”

“You liar... You said you’d only do half...but you put it all the way in...!”

For a moment, his face fell...and then his lips curled in a barely contained smirk.

“I know I’m not supposed to find this cute, but you’re really making it hard for me.”

“Screw you!”

He licked away my tears, and my heart thumped painfully in my chest. Probably just because his added weight was crushing me. *Yeah, that’s all.*



“I’ll take it slow, okay?”

“Nnn...aah!”

My deepest parts trembled with pleasure as Tsuzuki continued to tease my shaft. Meanwhile, there was a dull ache in my rectum, as if numbed by his presence. As the tiny thrusts continued, the pain steadily shifted, and by the time we were both damp with sweat, it was drowned out entirely by the roar of pleasure across my entire body.

“Aah...aaahh! Aah...aah...Tsuzuki—!”

“Nngh... Say my name!”

“Ushio... Ushio...!”

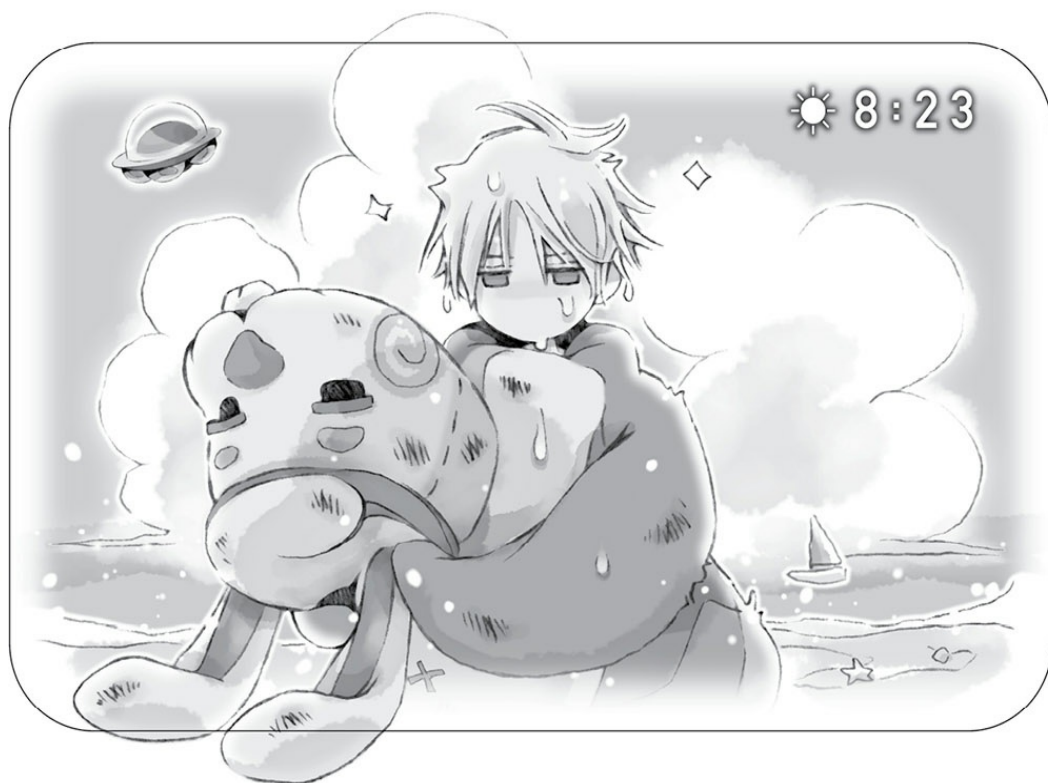
Again and again I heeded his request. Then he ripped open my button-up shirt, hiked up the T-shirt underneath, and began to suck one of my lightly swollen nipples. In response, I felt my insides clamp down on his manhood.

“Aah...aah!”

“Nngh...damn it,” he groaned under his breath as he rolled in and out of me like the tide. “You were right... No one else will ever compare to this...!”

I felt the same way, actually, but I wasn’t about to admit it—not without taking a hit to my ego. However, perhaps some concessions could be made.

Right now, it was time for these two astronauts to fly back to their home planet. But tomorrow afternoon, once we woke up in each other’s arms...before I headed out to work that night...maybe I could meet him halfway with a “Yeah, me too.”



BOTH ARE FOR YOU

THE NEWS COMMENTARY ended at precisely 10:43 p.m., exactly in accordance with the cue sheet.

“Rest assured, we’ll be keeping an eye on future developments.”

It was strange—no matter how long-winded any given commentator’s critique, once Asou wrapped it up, it felt finished. Conversely, no matter how spicy the take, without Asou there to act as a platform, the viewers would probably find it lacking.

Unlike me, Asou conducted himself as though the cameras were rolling at all times. He seemingly paid no mind to the assistant director’s cue cards, nor the floor manager’s directions passed on from the SCR (studio control room). No matter whether he was behind or ahead of schedule, he never batted an eye; he simply made adjustments to balance it out on the fly. The SCR could be losing their minds over delayed video footage and he’d just buy time with some cleverly improvised commentary until it finally played—so natural, you’d think it was in the script. Each broadcast was putty in Asou’s hands, just waiting to be shaped.

I was reasonably confident in my own ability, but even then, I was forced to admit that I was nowhere near this guy’s level...and quite possibly I would never get there. Sometimes effort and aptitude couldn’t make up for sheer talent.

“Next up, let’s head over to sports. Minagawa-san, if you would.”

“Yes, sir!”

The feed then switched away from the long rectangular table with Asou, me, and the other main commentators to a round table positioned stage right. Next to it, the sports anchor stood at attention beside a large TV monitor.

“Minagawa Tatsuki here! First up, let’s talk soccer. We’ve got a great interview with the rising star who transferred to Italy’s own A.C. Milan—and after the clip we’ll have a special gift, so be sure to stick around!”

From there, we received a seven-minute respite from the camera as the video played—but all it meant was that we weren’t visible to the people watching at home, so I couldn’t let my guard all the way down. No slouching, no elbows on

the table. Instead, I focused intently on the interview footage...or at least, I pretended to. In order to play up my love of my work, I nodded, smiled, and/or leaned forward whenever it felt natural to do so.

Meanwhile, in my mind, I pictured what I would do if some idiot paid *me* five billion yen. Fill a swimming pool with bills and swim around in it? Take a helicopter to work every day? Honestly, I was a saint for even entertaining the notion of continuing to hold a job as a billionaire. Maybe I'd give Ushio about a million of it.

Next, I paused to think of a few comments I could give in the event I was asked for my opinion after the video ended—including different length variations to account for the time remaining.

As usual, I was on top of my game.

"Kunieda-san, you seemed like you were real interested in that sports interview! Are you a soccer fan?" asked the assistant director, once the show had ended and everyone was wrapping up for the night.

See? I knew one of these plebs would take the bait.

"No, no, I don't know anything about sports. It was just a really fascinating video," I replied, making sure to flatter the editing team. "Especially since I heard a lot of athletes tend to avoid interviews."

"Exactly!" he replied, glancing over at tonight's star anchor. "You're *incredible*, Minagawa-san! That guy's always come off as super aloof during postgame press conferences, but with you he was completely at ease! And you filmed it right there in his house?! I've never heard of anyone letting a reporter into their house before!"

"Yeah, I guess that's pretty rare," Tatsuki replied casually, like it was no big deal. "He seemed kinda grouchy at first, but then we started talking about manga, and for some reason he really opened up after that! When I told him I hadn't read the latest volume, he told me I could come over to his house and read it, as long as I helped him tidy up in exchange. So I did!"

"What, for real?!"

“Yeah, I searched his whole house for porno magazines! But we had to cut that part, obviously.”

“What happened to helping him tidy up...?”

“Tatsuki!” called Asou, interrupting the conversation. Timidly, the assistant director took a few steps back. Not that Asou was really that intimidating, but something about him commanded that sort of respect.

Tatsuki, however, was perhaps too dense to pick up on social cues. “What’s up?” he asked offhandedly.

“I noticed a mistake you made tonight.”

“Wait, what? Where?”

“I had a feeling you hadn’t noticed. Kunieda, clue him in, will you?”

Ugh, do it yourself!

I paused to “contemplate” for a moment, then raised a finger in epiphany. “You’re talking about the ‘special gift’ promotion segment, right?”

“Correct,” Asou nodded.

“Huh? What was wrong with it?” asked Tatsuki.

“You said ‘three lucky winners,’” I explained.

He stared at me blankly. “But the subtitles on screen literally said the same thing!”

Asou gave me a look that said *keep going*.

Rolling my eyes internally, I continued, “The subtitles are one thing, but in the code of conduct outlined in the Asabi employee handbook, newscasters are only supposed to refer to the people watching at home as ‘viewers’ out of respect.”

“Huh? I’m not sure they taught us that during orientation week... Maybe your handbook is out of date by now?”

“You both have the exact same handbook,” Asou insisted. “Kunieda was only hired two or three seasons ahead of you, you know.”

“What does it even matter?” Tatsuki whined.

“If you intend to be a professional in this industry, then I never want to hear those words from you again. And here I was going to compliment you on your excellent interview...”

“What? Noooo, c’mon! Tell me I did good! Or, on second thought, maybe wait until Shitara-san’s around!”

“You called?”

Just then, Shitara stepped out of the SCR, and Tatsuki perked up. “Asou-san was just saying that I’m a genius!” he bragged.

“Oh yeah? A genius who doesn’t know how to pronounce the word ‘respite’?”

“I’m pretty sure most people don’t know how to pronounce that!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. It’s time for the eval, folks!”

After a brief review of tonight’s broadcast, we were free to go...but then Tatsuki sidled up to me. At first glance, he looked like the happy-go-lucky type—the kind of guy you couldn’t picture ever having any negative emotions. Whenever he smiled, his blinding white teeth seemed to take up more than half of his face.

“Kunieda-san, are you free this Saturday?”

“Why do you ask?” I replied, quietly concealing the fact that I did *not* want to have to waste a single second of my precious day off, thank you very much.

“You should come out with me for a mixer!”

If I wanted to sit around and waste my time, I’d stay at home and play the vuvuzela. I donned my best apologetic smile. “Sorry, but I’m not great at small talk with strangers. I’d just be a wet blanket.”

“Don’t worry about it! I’ll handle all the small talk! You just have to sit there and smile!”

If that’s all you want from me, then hang a poster of my face, for all I care. Take a hint, will you? I don’t want to go! Annoyed, I contemplated the best way to let him down without being too harsh.

Just then, another staff member stepped in. “Lay off Kunieda-san, will you? You’re making him feel bad.”

Excellent. Well done. For your efforts, I’ll give you...I don’t know, one of my used erasers or something.

“Awww, man...”

“By the way, did you hear about the day trip to the hot springs?”

“Oh yeah, that! What’s the plan?”

With the subject safely changed, I hurried away to wash my face.

After another meeting in the staff room and a dozen additional minor tasks, it was nearly midnight. For an evening anchor who left work during primetime, the train commute home was hell on earth—but luckily for me, late-night anchors were given free taxi tickets, so I got to skip all that nonsense.

Stepping out of the car, I thanked the driver with a smile...and once I crossed over the threshold into my apartment, the Kunieda Kei show was officially over for the night. Now it was time to take a shower, change into my tracksuit, slide on a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses and a surgical mask, and head back outside. Two keys hung from the keyring in my pocket; one was a state-of-the-art copy-protected key, and the other was an antique three-leaf clover key.

The cold was actually pretty tolerable on nights like these when the wind was still. Dead leaves littered the pavement, giving off a pleasant autumn scent. Not long after I started walking, as if on cue, I got an e-mail: *Milk, white bread, packaging tape.*

Where’s the “Please buy this for me,” asshole? Nevertheless, I stopped by the convenience store, then walked another ten minutes and let myself into the house with the old clover key.

“They were sold out of white bread, so I got whole grain,” I told him, in a gruff voice that no one would ever mistake for the famous Kunieda Kei. And in response, what did I get? No “come on in,” not even a passing glance. He was too busy staring at his computer screen.

“Put it in the fridge,” he replied.

Rude much? “How about a thank you?”

“Good work, champ.”

“Screw you.”

I walked up the stairs to the second floor and stuffed the whole to-go bag into the refrigerator. Next, I took out a can of beer. Then I sat down on the bed, propped myself up with a pillow, stretched my legs out, and enjoyed my drink as I reviewed tonight’s recording of *The News*.

A short while later, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, followed by the sound of the refrigerator door opening. “Hey, don’t leave the tape in there!”

“Don’t like it? Do it yourself next time.”

Shrugging off his complaint, I went back to the TV. Then I heard the bedsprings creak on the other side of the bed.

“Tonight’s interview segment was really interesting,” Ushio said.

I turned and glared at him. “Great. Not you too.”

“What?”

“Everyone’s always fawning all over that guy, that’s what!”

“I’m not *fawning* over him. I just enjoyed the show, that’s all.”

“Just because he won over some stupid athlete, he thinks he’s the big man on campus... Not only that, he invited me to a mixer! Me! To a *mixer*!”

“He’s probably just trying to make sure his kind, warmhearted senpai feels included. He sounds like a nice guy.”

“Trust me, it’s not that.”

Ushio took the beer out of my hand and stole a sip, then regarded me with a withering look. “You know what? You complain way too much about this... ‘Minakawa Tatsugi’ or whoever. Feels like you do nothing but trash-talk him every single night.”

“Yeah, because I freakin’ hate his guts!”

Asou had returned to work that fall with one third of his stomach removed—just in time for the autumn reshuffle. During the six-month period that I filled in for him, the ratings hovered mostly between fifteen and seventeen percent—passing marks for what essentially amounted to a stopgap. In the end, the numbers we achieved on our first night were nothing more than a lucky fluke.

Since I'd already gotten into the rhythm of my new role, they shifted me to the position of co-anchor/program coordinator/script reader, and I was perfectly fine with that. What I didn't like, however, was the rookie they assigned to sports. He was just twenty-five with no prior reporting experience, and yet somehow he landed a spot on the station's flagship news show? To the rest of us, that was an even bigger bombshell than Asou's return to work.

Worst of all, anyone who talked about it inevitably prefaced it with, "Obviously I was surprised when it happened with Kunieda, but..." This made me feel inferior enough as it was. But then, amidst all the excitement and curiosity and resentment that emanated from our studio, in walked Tatsuki like it was no big deal. I was furious at how fast he fit in with us. Of course, every time he screwed up, I gloated internally, but this was always followed by anger at his utter lack of effort...and there was only one person on this earth I could vent to.

"I've hated him ever since his interview. Stupid smug smirk on his face... He thinks he can just coast through life by being nice and funny and smart..."

"And he's correct," Ushio shrugged. This pissed me off even more...not that I wanted him to trash talk the guy just because I was doing it. "It's not his fault you chose to create a fake persona and he didn't."

Doesn't mean I want you to call me out on it. "Yeah, I know. Shut up."

Having lost all motivation to continue my news review, I switched off the TV, finished my beer, and pulled the covers up to my neck.

"That's it? You're done?"

"I'm too tired."

I turned my back to him; he started playing with my hair.

"What?" I snapped.

“I’m fawning over you. See? Fawn, fawn, fawn.”

I’m gonna “fawn” my fist up your ass. “Knock it off, would you? I’m a ‘go big or go home’ kind of guy. I want to be adored by the masses.”

“Even if they did, you wouldn’t bat an eye. The thing about ‘the masses’ is, they don’t swoon over a guy who was always competent right from the start.”

“Well, I’m not gonna jump for joy! I’m a grown man!”

“Yes, yes, I know. And you’re working so hard. I’m soooo proud of you.”

The more emphasis he put on the so’s, the more sarcastic it started to sound.

“You’re soooo adorable, too.”

“You can stop fawning now.”

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for me.”

“That’s stupid,” I spat angrily, hoping to hide my quavering voice.

“Look at me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I wanna see more of Grouchy Slob Kei before you have to transform back.”

“No. Just let me sleep. I have to go in at ten tomorrow.”

“That’s early. How come?”

“Gotta do street interviews.”

“Where at? Want me to casually loiter around?”

“Do that and I’ll ignore the hell out of you... I’m going to Ginza, and Minagawa’s going to Shibuya. Waste of my damn time... They oughta just send him by himself. Why the hell should I have to do half of his work?” I grumbled as my annoyance resurfaced.

Just then, I felt Ushio bite my earlobe from behind. It didn’t hurt, but it did startle me, and I let out a tiny yelp.

“Agh! Don’t! Stop!”

“What was that? ‘Don’t stop?’”

I whirled around to look at him. “That is *not* what I said!”

He fixed me with a seductive look that said, *You sure?*

“I told you... I’m going to sleep.”

“So go to sleep. I’ll find something to tide me over.”

“What am I, fridge leftovers?!”

“Now, now, settle down.”

Every time I entertained his teasing with a serious response, I was only playing right into his hands. I had learned this lesson a dozen times by now, and yet it never seemed to stick. Generally I considered myself to be a pretty smart guy, but when it came to Ushio, I was so goddamn stupid.

He yanked my mask down, slid my glasses up, and leaned over me.

“Hey—!”

At first I thought he was going to kiss me, but he stopped short just as our noses touched. We stared at each other for a moment.

“Wh...what?”

“There. Now I can finally see your handsome face.” He smiled innocently.
“Welcome home, Kei.”

Words could not express how frustrating it was that those three little words were somehow more fulfilling to me than the adoration of thousands. And worse still, I was pretty sure he knew it.

I hated how devoted I was to him—so in revenge, I kissed him.

“Oh? Finally in the mood, are we?”

“Shut up and let’s get this over with. I’m sleepy.”

“Roger that.”

As he peppered my cheeks and forehead with kisses, even I couldn’t keep a straight face. When he gestured wordlessly for me to strip, I was at best dubious...but then, when he climbed naked on top of me, it felt as though I was

swaddled in a heavenly blanket made just for me.

“Mm...”

As he held me in his tight embrace, my breathing grew hot and heavy, and I found myself frustrated that I couldn't simultaneously enjoy both a peaceful night *and* a more passionate one.

“Aah!”

Maybe he felt obligated to move things along quickly for my sake; he smoothly trailed his fingers down my body and arrived at my pelvis without any detours, pausing only to caress my hip before following the curve to its logical conclusion.

“Nnn...”

He gently grasped my recumbent shaft and deftly began to tease my lust awake, willing it to spill forth from inside.

“Well now! This is working pretty well, considering how ‘sleepy’ you claim to be.”

“It's working *because* I'm sleepy, stupid!”

“Oh really?”

“Aah...!”

His dry, rough palm added to the stimulus, driving me wild every time. Meanwhile, he ran his free hand all over my sweaty body and grinned. “Your skin's so smooth.”

Times like these, I always felt so unspeakably reaffirmed. I never used to need anyone's approval, and yet...for once, it made me appreciate the body I was born in. *I hope you get that, dumbass.*

“Aah...aaahh...”

The next thing I knew, our bodies were pressed perfectly together, skin against skin. And with each repeat visit up and down my member, the foundation of my lust grew stronger. So too did my heartbeat, transmitted to Ushio through direct contact. He pecked playfully at my loosely parted lips; the

audible wetness summoned forth a different wetness down south.

“Aah!”

The fluids leaking from my tip added lubrication to his motions, making a sexy mess...but this only enhanced my pleasure. He slid his tongue into my mouth, and I pushed back in kind, devouring him. As he teased the roof of my mouth, my cock twitched in his hand.

“Mm...mmph...”

“Find something to tide me over,” my ass. The sweet torture was enough to make me thrust my hips in impatience. In response, he rubbed his thumb against the border that delineated my engorged head and my shaft.

“Ngh!”

The way I saw it, my libido was a solid object located deep inside me. Subjected to the heat from Ushio’s hands and tongue, however, it melted down into wax and slowly leaked out.

“Nnn...aaahh...aah!”

“Kei.”

And the heat of his voice only added more fuel to that fire.

“Do you wanna cum?”

“Ngh... Yeah...I wanna cum...and then I want to go straight to sleep,” I whimpered. Normally I would’ve kept that last part to myself, but Ushio had a way of getting the unvarnished truth out of me. Maybe it was because he was the only one who ever managed to see the man behind the mask.

“Then you don’t get to.”

He slid his hand down and pressed a finger hard against my entrance—not hard enough to penetrate, but hard enough to make me jerk away from him.

“Don’t!”

“Putting it off again?”

“You told me I could sleep after this!”

“Yeah, and that was a joke, dumb. I’m not gonna have my way with your unconscious body.”

“Aah! No!”

Taking care not to let me orgasm, he pumped out more of my thick, translucent fluid and used it to soften up my entrance. You’d think I’d be in control of my own body, and yet he manipulated me so easily it was actually terrifying. As he distracted my mind with the handjob, he slid his finger past the point of no return, teasing my prostate until I was in danger of cumming the second he inserted himself.

“No... Aaahh... Don’t...!”

He was gripping the base of my shaft so tightly that I couldn’t cum even if I wanted to.

“Agh... Ushio, that hurts... I need to cum!”

“But if you do, you’ll just go to sleep, won’t you?”

“No... I won’t! I promise!”

“I’m not sure I believe you... Well, at least this way you won’t be able to sleep even if you try.”

Every inch of my rectum had grown sensitive to the three fingers now wriggling around inside, and it was obvious it would take more than mere ejaculation to truly satisfy my urges.

“Aah... Hurry...!”

“I hear you, I hear you.”

The “starts out resistant, ends up begging for it” trope was all too common, and yet I still hadn’t found a countermeasure. Funny, that.

“Hang in there for a little longer.”

This is your fault, you know! You think you can buy my forgiveness with one measly kiss?! And yet I closed my eyes and let it happen anyway. (In more ways than one.)

“Aah...aaahh!”

Then I felt an intense heat enter my bowels. Instantly, sirens blared in my brain. But my entrance had since learned how to accommodate guests, and once it took in the widest part, my fear transmuted into ecstasy.

“Mmm... You feel so good...”

“Nngh...hhh...aah...gah...aaahh...!”

Once Ushio was all the way in, he leaned in close enough for me to finally wrap my arms around him and trail my fingers up and down his back. It was November, and yet he was sweating buckets. His excess lust for me was spilling over. And I wanted nothing more than to lick it all up.



“Aah! Aah...aah...nngh...Ushio—!”

Fortunately, at the pace we were going, I could still think clearly.

“I see now,” Ushio murmured cryptically. “Hmmm...I’m gonna have to disagree.”

“Aah... What are you...talking about...?”

“You know when you said grown men can’t jump for joy? I think you might be wrong about that. Because I’m looking at one right now.” He prodded my cheeks with a teasing grin, and I felt the blood rush to my head all the more.

“I am not jumping for joy! Screw you!”

“Why yes, I am screwing you.”

“Shut the fuck up, you sick freak!”

“Now, now. Settle down, cutie.”

“I said shut the—aah! Gah!”

“I thought you said you wanted to cum.”

“Aah...gah...haah...!”

He ravaged me so hard, the snarky thoughts in my head melted away before I could voice them. And after that, I moaned and writhed to Ushio’s heart’s content.

That asshole. Claims he wants something “to tide him over” and then he makes me go a second round. I sat in the news van on the drive to our morning film location, quietly biting back yawn after yawn—

“Oh man, I’m so nervous! This is my first time doing street interviews, y’know!”

—plus any caustic comments regarding my excessively energetic junior anchor.

“Any tips, Kunieda-san?”

God, I wish I could stuff this mic down your throat.

“I can’t think of anything in particular,” I mused, donning my best pensive face. “You’ll want to make sure you get an even spread of all different age groups and genders. Plus, you’ll want to avoid anyone who looks like they’re in a hurry. Oh, and don’t try to steer the conversation—you want them to answer in their own words, even if it takes them a while. But the best advice I can give is to have confidence in yourself. Knowing you, Minagawa-kun, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Really? You think so?”

No, I’m just being polite, stupid. Don’t take everything at face value. A little insecurity is healthy. Swallowing my venom, I smiled softly. “Good luck.”

That said, street interviews could be quite the challenge. Topic of the day: the government’s public pension plan investment management. We each had a quota of fifty people to interview, trawling for comments we could compile into a video segment. More than once, people would spot our cameras at a distance and immediately turn on their heel or cross the street to avoid us; other times we’d set our sights on someone, only for them to quicken their pace and stare pointedly at the sidewalk. This was all very common; in fact, I’d heard stories of rookie anchors so disheartened by the constant rejection that they’d throw in the towel and trudge back to the van. Amateurs, all of them.

Meanwhile, I achieved my quota of fifty people in approximately two hours, breaks included.

“Incredible work, Kunieda. You always seem to get the best footage... I wish street interviews were always this easy,” sighed the location manager.

Pretty great, aren’t I? “I simply lucked out and found a lot of nice people this time around,” I replied modestly.

“You know, I think you could make a great luxury car salesman. Or a real estate agent—oh, sorry. Gotta take this.” He answered his cell phone. “Yeah? Seriously? Whoa...” Then he turned back to me. “Apparently Tatsuki just finished his quota, too.”

“Huh?”

“He’s pretty good at this stuff, too! Very quick learner, that one. Plus, he’s just

got this magnetic charm, you know what I mean?”

“Oh, yes. Very impressive,” I replied, looking mildly surprised...but on the inside, I was frothing with rage. *Damn that little twerp!*

That night found me cursing Tatsuki’s name once again. And once again, Ushio didn’t quite approve.

“Wouldn’t it piss you off more if he didn’t take your advice and just screwed everything up?”

“That’s not the problem, okay? It just drives me insane how he struts around like he can do it all without even trying.”

“So basically you feel threatened by him.”

“Excuse me?”

“You have to put on an act, so you resent anyone who can win affection by being themselves while also being good at their job.”

“That’s not true! Why the hell would I feel threatened by *him*?!”

“You never know—he might be busting his ass behind the scenes, or maybe there’s more to him than meets the eye. Although I doubt anyone could be as fake as you.”

“Don’t call me fake!”

“Hey now, don’t get me wrong. It’s part of what I love about you.”

Warn me before you drop the L word, damn it! I froze, speechless.

“Anyway, I need to go make a phone call,” he continued, then got up and headed downstairs. A moment later, I could hear him speaking a different language—English, probably. I didn’t even know he had contacts outside of Japan.

While it pissed me off that he would leave me hanging in the middle of our conversation, the intermission gave me time to compose myself as I ruminated on his viewpoint.

Threatened. Resentment. In other words, I was...jealous? *No. No way in hell.*

Never had I felt some deep desire to mingle with my coworkers—I wasn't the type. And though admittedly Tatsuki was reasonably competent and quick on the uptake, I was confident I was the better anchor. Objectively.

Tatsuki's voice was on the higher side, his intonation was iffy, and whenever his focus slipped he would speak too quickly. While he was good-looking, he let too much of his natural energy shine through; this was all well and good for a sports anchor, of course, but he could never host a full-scale news show on his own. He lacked the gravitas required to speak about tragedy. In summation, he simply couldn't compete with anchors in my bracket—otherwise he wouldn't have made it onto my show at all. As much as I hated everyone blowing smoke up his ass all the time, I never actually felt endangered by his presence.

Yeah, that's it. I just don't gel with chatty airheads, that's all.

Shortly after I reached this conclusion, Ushio returned.

"You know what I think? I think you should let me meet this guy," he said.

"What?"

"Minagawa-kun. You sure love to scream about him every night, so now I'm curious what he's like."

"Hell no. Anything but that."

"How else am I gonna find out if he's as bad as you make him sound?"

"Absolutely not," I insisted, but he ignored me.

"Fine, then I'll just ask Shitara-san," he replied with a smirk as he crawled back onto the bed, and I knew at once that he was dead serious.

"Stop! I mean it!"

"I promise I won't make it weird. I won't even bring up *Kunieda-san*."

"That's not what I'm worried about!"

"Wow. Glad to know you trust me so much."

The conversation hit a snag yet again. Frustrated, I slammed my fist on the mattress. "Don't you dare!"

"Why not? I just wanna grab lunch with the guy. Who knows, maybe I won't

like him either! But I won't know unless I try!"

"But what if you do like him...?"

"Then I've made a new friend, I guess."

"Are you trying to piss me off?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to make friends with him, stupid! It stresses me out enough just having to work with him—I refuse to let him infiltrate my personal life! Think about it: you were stupid enough to fall for my little act, weren't you? Plus, you don't exactly take things slow when it comes to—"

"Kei."

He hardly ever called my name unless we were going at it—something I was guilty of as well—so it caught me off guard and made my heart skip a beat. Being good at talking and being good at arguing were two very different skillsets.

Then he turned to me and said, in his most "disapproving parent" voice, "If you're going to be jealous, be cuter about it, okay?"

"What?!"

"Tell me you don't want to share me, and I'll reconsider."

"You sure are full of yourself, aren't you? Get bent! Go to hell!"

"Oh, sorry. Getting another call."

And with that, he headed back downstairs. But this time, evidently there was a lot to talk about, because he didn't come back for a long, long time.

Ultimately, despite my begging and pleading, Ushio went straight to Shitara and got him to arrange a meeting with Tatsuki. He told me I didn't have to come, to which I said, "Hah! I don't think so, asshole!"

Not that I was worried about the things he seemed to think I was worried about (because, for the record, I was way hotter than that douche). I just didn't want to have to see him getting all buddy-buddy with my least favorite person.

Was that really so hard to understand? *Jackass. Maybe he puts all his compassion into his projects and doesn't save any for the rest of us. Try to be a little more like me, would you?*

"Whoa... I didn't realize the guy who made our title sequence was so young!" said the source of my problems, his tone chipper. "Real talk, I was expecting some geeky old geezer or something."

"It actually takes a lot of physical stamina, y'know, putting together all those huge sets and whatnot," Ushio replied.

"Yeah? How long does it take to make, like, one single second of animation?"

"It depends, but I'd say on average it takes about eight hours."

"No way! Seriously?! I could never do that!"

"I see you're almost finished with your drink. Can I get you another?"

"Oh, thank you. I'll take an oolong highball."

I couldn't tell if they actually liked each other, but they were certainly keeping the conversation going. Tatsuki was a total social butterfly, and Ushio himself was more outgoing than his nerdy hobby would suggest. *This is exactly what I was afraid of*, I thought to myself miserably.

But although Ushio should have known full well how I was feeling on the inside, he instead asked the world's most unnecessary question: "Minagawa-kun, what's your impression of Kunieda-san?"

"Kunieda-san? He's a god among men! A living legend! Seriously, the guy's incredible. He can pronounce anything—any prefecture, any rail line, any street! You name it, he's got it memorized! And he never lets anything get under his skin!"

"Oh, I'm not quite that perfect." *Damn right I am. Glad you've noticed.* This bolstered my mood by a fraction. Still, the compliments felt cheap coming from a guy like him.

"Y'know, I used to think you were some kinda flawless wizard who could do anything, but now I know better. You're always studying, aren't you, Kunieda-san? While the rest of us are sitting around eating chips, you're always reading

the newspaper or looking stuff up in your intonation dictionary.”

“If anyone’s a ‘flawless wizard,’ it’s you, Minagawa-kun.”

“What, you think I don’t actually try? Well, think again! I put in a decent amount of effort, if you ask me. Once I found out I was gonna be on a news show, I figured I should do some research, so I bought all of Ikegami Akira’s books on journalism!”

“And how many did you read?” asked Shitara.

“Half...of the first one...”

“Right. And that’s a ‘decent effort’ to you?”

“Aww, c’mon, Shitara-san! You told me to just be myself, remember? Because Asou-san and Kunieda-san will cover for my mistakes?”

Gee, thanks for volunteering me!

“Only because you were throwing a fit about it!”

“To be fair, Shitara-san, you have a way of dragging people into things against their will,” Ushio laughed, but I found I couldn’t really laugh along with him. If you asked me, I wasn’t “dragged” so much as harpooned. “When you decide you want to work with someone, you make it happen no matter what. You’re a producer through and through.”

“For the record, I do make an effort to follow up with people, y’know. Wouldn’t want to force them into anything. That reminds me—Kunieda, weren’t you the one who interviewed Minagawa?”

Ugh, this conversation keeps getting worse and worse.

“Coincidentally, yes. As it happened, I was assigned to facilitate the secondary interviews for that round. And out of everyone I spoke to, I remember Minagawa-kun was the only one who turned up in jeans. I was quite surprised, to say the least.”

“Was that part of your plan? To stand out from the crowd?” Ushio asked Tatsuki.

“No way!” he replied emphatically. “It said to wear casual clothes right there

in the e-mail! But to be honest, I only went because me and a friend were applying together for fun, so I didn't put too much thought into it at the time."

"Oops, I got the part instead of my friend!" Who do you think you are, a pop star? I thought to myself bitterly, smiling as I picked at my seafood stew. But then they brought up an even worse memory:

"I heard you hit on Kunieda during that interview. Is that true?" asked Shitara.

"Oh yeah... Yeah, that definitely happened."

You're supposed to deny it, dumbass!

"It was part of the test," I added quickly, though not so quick as to appear hasty. "The interview process for the newsroom always includes a few quirky little tests. In this case, we asked each person to compliment the interviewer for one solid minute."

More than anything, I wanted Ushio to understand that I was only doing my job.

"Right, right. Or the thing where they have to come up with ways to sell an entire truckload of bananas within a single hour."

"And that's when you hit on him?" Ushio asked Tatsuki.

"Ha ha! Yeah...I was so naïve and foolish back then..."

I told you to deny it, you moron!

"I walked up to him and I was like..."

Out of nowhere, Tatsuki reached over and took my hand; meanwhile, I barely suppressed the urge to yank it back. I was trapped on one end of a small four-person table, my seat up against the wall, so I had no room to lean away. Then he drew his face close to mine, his expression firm.

"'You captivated me from the moment I walked in. You're not like the rest of them—you truly shine.' Or something like that, anyway."

Just like that, he dropped my hand and went back to being regular old Tatsuki.

What are you, a wild animal? I can never get a read on you. His personality type was Kryptonite to someone like me, who was constantly on guard...which

is why, when given the opportunity, I voted against him in the final hiring discussion. Nevertheless, somehow I knew he would make it through despite my protests. Setting aside his sloppy attire, he had the makings of a TV personality written all over him. Plus, he never once recoiled from the interview tests, which took a certain kind of guts...and to top it off, his ad-lib “compliment” segment lasted a perfect sixty seconds.

“Oh, to be a fly on the wall during that interview! I bet even Kunieda got a little flustered when that happened, am I right?” Shitara asked.

“Nope. Not at all,” Tatsuki replied, shaking his head. “He just smiled and said, ‘Thank you. Next!’ and I was like ‘Holy crap, newscasters are so badass!’ Anyway, what do you guys wanna make with the last of the hotpot broth? Rice soup, ramen, or udon? I vote ramen!”

“Listen here, punk,” Shitara grinned wryly. “When you have hotpot at a business meeting, it’s considered polite to let your superiors make that call.”

“Oh. My bad. Sorry.”

But no one was actually mad at him, of course, and so he got his wish. *It must take some kind of talent to wrap the whole world around your little finger like that*, I thought to myself. Admittedly ramen was my top choice as well, but it was always miserable trying to eat food I loved while simultaneously maintaining my pristine persona. Nine times out of ten, I would rather just eat cup noodles at home with Ushio.

Tatsuki poured the dry, curly noodles into the seafood broth, then turned to Ushio. “So, are you good friends with Kunieda-san?”

My heart skipped a beat. I glanced up at Ushio across the table from me.

“No, not at all,” he replied without missing a beat. “We met through an interview he conducted at my house a while back. Hadn’t talked to him in a while, so I figured I’d ask Shitara-san to set something up. Oh, but we live in the same neighborhood, so we bump into each other on the street every now and then.”

“Oh, man! Y’know, I’ve always wondered what Kunieda-san does in his free time! He’s such an enigma, y’know? I keep inviting him to hang out, but he

always turns me down!”

“I’m just not hugely into mixers.”

“I’ve invited you to more than just mixers! The past month and a half, I’ve asked you to karaoke, bowling, futsal, company baseball...”

“Oh, you’re right,” I replied politely.

But I could feel my flawless smile slowly starting to slip.

Outside the restaurant, we all went our separate ways.

“Since we’re headed in the same direction anyway, would you care to share a taxi?” I asked Ushio in my Kunieda Kei voice.

Initially he looked startled. Then he glanced down at the ground. “Sure, that’d be great,” he replied politely, as though I was a stranger.

Together, we walked down the street to find a place where we could flag a cab. As we did, I glanced over my shoulder repeatedly. Once I confirmed we’d put some distance between ourselves and the other two, I turned to him and hissed, “What was *that* about?”

“What was what about?”

“You made it sound like we hardly ever interact!”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly tell him you come over my house every day, now could I?”

I could hear the hurt in his voice, and my full belly grew heavier.

“I mean, true, but...you still should’ve told me ahead of time. That way I can keep my story straight.”

“Right.”

Normally he’d argue with me on purpose, then tease me when I got mad. This time, however, he was unusually quiet.

“I’ll remember that for next time...if there even is a next time.”

This didn’t make me feel better in the slightest; I couldn’t even bring myself to

lord it over him with a “Good. You’d better.” I never meant to argue him into silence—after all, he’d made the right call. It was just, well...loath as I was to admit it...the way he so readily treated me like a stranger actually kind of stung. I just wanted him to reassure me that we were fine. Problem was, I didn’t know how to ask for it.

Instead, what I said was, “Whatever. You’re the one who wanted to meet him.”

“Yep.”

“So what did you think...?”

“I was impressed.” For some reason, he lengthened his stride until he was a step ahead of me. “Me, personally, I always felt super nervous around ‘Kunieda-san,’ but him? Perfectly relaxed. It blows me away how some people manage to be so open and casual without crossing the line into rude.”

“Maybe you don’t think it’s rude, but I sure do.”

“Do you?”

As I followed along behind him, I found myself wishing I could see the look on his face...and yet, though we were mere inches apart, for some reason my legs wouldn’t move any faster. I couldn’t for the life of me understand why.

“Oh, there’s a taxi.”

Sure enough, a cab pulled up to the curb, its vacancy light illuminated. The moment we climbed in, we returned to being perfect strangers, so we sat in silence. After Ushio gave the driver the address, he leaned against the window, closed his eyes, and fell still.

But as for me, I couldn’t bring myself to find out if he was actually asleep.

That weekend, after our get-together on Friday night, I was too busy to go to Ushio’s—I had a bunch of meetings scheduled since the film trip was wrapping up. Then, on Monday afternoon when I arrived at work, Tatsuki walked over.

“Kunieda-san! Thanks again for coming out on Friday!”

“Likewise.”

“By the way, are you free two days from now? In the morning?”

“Er...is this work-related?”

Chances were high this wasn't another casual get-together if it was happening on a weekday, but still. *If he invites me to go see a movie or something, I'm gonna tattle on him like he's the damn No More Movie Thief.*

“Uhhh...half and half, I guess? See, I haven't spent my employee clothing allowance...”

Every six months, all anchors on staff were given a special allowance of 100,000 yen to ensure they had a personal wardrobe at the ready for times when the studio costume department couldn't provide for them, such as during film trips. That said, the money was obviously meant to be put toward work clothes, and as a man, there wasn't much I could really spend it on outside of suits and button-up shirts.

“And my boss chewed me out and told me I need to go spend it on something...”

To prevent misappropriation of funds, employees were obligated to submit receipts alongside photos of the items purchased.

“But the last time I tried, they told me the tie I bought was too tacky, so now I'm too scared to go by myself. That's why I want you to help me, Kunieda-san.”

Why me, damn it? I grimaced internally, smiled externally. But before I could come up with a plausible excuse, Asou chimed in.

“Help him out for me, would you? If this idiot gets our clothing allowance revoked, I don't know how I'll ever face the next generation of Asabi newscasters. I know it's a lot to ask, but just think of it like babysitting. You can come in late that day if you need to.”

And when the king of the newsroom asked for a favor, there was only one answer.

“Of course. Think nothing of it.”

Ugh, fuck my life. Why does he always have to bother me with this crap? I was so annoyed, I practically ripped the door off its hinges trying to get into Ushio's house.

"What the...?"

I was planning to vent all my problems right then and there, but then I saw the big suitcase sitting near the entrance, and my momentum quickly petered out.

"Well, that's one way to make an entrance," called Ushio as he came down the stairs. "What's wrong?"

"Uhh..." I faltered for a moment. "They're making me babysit Minagawa while he goes clothes shopping." I was originally planning to complain a lot more than that, but the words wouldn't come.

"Oh yeah?" Ushio replied with a yawn. "Well, have fun."

"I'm not going to 'have fun' and you know it!"

Slowly but surely, we were settling back into our usual rapport.

"Then why didn't you say no?"

"Because I can't! I'm not some freelancer like you! This shit is part of my job!"

"Then quit complaining and just get it over with. Isn't being married to the job your whole life's philosophy?"

Normally I enjoyed trading barbs with him, but today his comments seemed to cut a bit more deeply, and it made me want to change the subject. "What's with the suitcase?"

"Oh yeah—I'm going to America for a bit to meet up with an industry contact of mine. His daughter's getting married, and he wants me to help him put something together to play at the ceremony."

"So it's a paid gig?"

"Well...he said he'd let me stay at his house for free, so I didn't really bother asking about compensation. But it might be a good networking opportunity, so I guess...half and half?"

You “guess”? I bristled internally. “Gee, must be nice to be able to take off whenever you feel like it! With my nine-to-five, I’m lucky if I get a three-day weekend more than twice a year,” I snarked, tapping the toe of my shoe against the suitcase.

Ushio furrowed his brow. “Excuse me? All the free health insurance and benefits you get, and you want to complain to me about time off? Go ahead—see what it’s like to be self-employed, I dare you. I’m sure plenty of clients would want to work with *the* Kunieda Kei.”

In a full-time position, I gave up certain freedoms in exchange for protection; compared to a freelancer, my job was far more secure. Obviously I understood that. And I’d seen Ushio busting his ass day and night to meet his deadlines. But surely he knew that I knew that, right? So why was he fighting me on every little thing? Not that I especially enjoyed it when he dodged the subject instead, but we couldn’t exactly maintain a conversation if he kept rebuffing every statement. Now it was starting to feel like all that dodging was precisely what kept our relationship peaceful in the first place.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t the kind of guy who could back down from an argument once it started.

“Where was I when you made these travel plans, anyway? Why am I only just now finding out?”

“I didn’t have exact dates until recently—I want to say sometime last week? I was planning to tell you, but you didn’t show up at all last weekend.”

“You could have called or e-mailed me!”

“Says the guy who’s never once informed me of his plans in advance.”

“Well...!”

I started to say something like “You never told me to!” but quickly realized the same could be said of me, too. *What is happening right now?* I asked myself as my brain struggled to keep up. *I came here to bitch about work, but instead he just blows me off for some random lady’s wedding? What did I ever do wrong? Nothing! I’m not the bad guy here!*

“I’m going home,” I grumbled. “You can go ahead and have fun flying off to

America or wherever. I hope you enjoy speaking broken English at your fancy little party with fancy little Ritz cracker *hors d'oeuvres!*”

“Right back at you,” Ushio called after me, leaning out through the front door before I could close it. “I hope you and Minagawa-kun have a nice little shopping trip together. Too bad I’ll never know what that’s like.”

After that, we cut off contact with each other completely, so I could only assume Ushio caught his flight as planned. Meanwhile, our most recent conversation replayed in my mind over and over and over, pissing me off all over again with each encore. But I would sooner die than let anyone find out Kunieda Kei was upset, so when the shopping trip with Tatsuki rolled around, I conducted myself more cheerfully than ever—encouraging him to try on clothes, offering advice, anything to get out of there as quickly as possible. In the end, after a quick look around the department store, we successfully acquired a number of suit jackets, slacks, button-up shirts, and ties.

“Seriously, thank you so much. You really saved my bacon!”

“Oh, I’m just glad I could help. I think you’ll look great in those.”

The lie felt slimy and bitter on my tongue, like that time I idiotically mistook foaming facial cleanser for toothpaste.

“Y’know what? Let’s get lunch somewhere—my treat. As thanks for all your help.”

“That’s a kind offer, but I imagine all the restaurants will be packed at this time of day. I’d rather get something at the staff cafeteria.”

We were already attracting enough attention as it was, standing around in public radiating our “TV personality” energy. The last thing I wanted to do was drag this yappy mutt into an enclosed space.

“Good point,” Tatsuki replied, backing down more quickly than I anticipated.

As we crossed the pedestrian bridge in the direction of the train station, a woman’s voice called from up ahead: “Minagawa-kun?”

Oh god, is it one of his fans? Kill me now. I should’ve offered to pay for a taxi.

But then Tatsuki replied with something I wasn't expecting: "Oh, hey! Long time no see!"

As far as I could tell, this woman wasn't in the industry—just an ordinary middle-aged woman. Was she a relative? A classmate's mom?

"I know! I haven't seen you here in ages!"

"Yeah, I've been really busy with my new show."

"Oh, I bet! I'll have you know I watch it every night! I can't believe you made it onto Asou-san's show... Wait, is that Kunieda-san with you?"

"Hello there," I greeted her with a polite smile, masking my annoyance at being treated like an afterthought.

"Kunieda-san's great, isn't he? He's always helping me out!"

"That's because you have such magnetic charm, Minagawa-kun. I'm sure people flock to you wherever you go!"

"You think so? Woohoo!"

Has the concept of modesty ever even occurred to you?

"All right, you take care, now! Good luck at work!" the woman exclaimed, invading Tatsuki's personal space with a clap on the shoulder. And with that, she disappeared into the distance.

"Someone you know?" I asked once she was gone—not because I actually cared, but because I figured that was what a normal person would ask in this situation.

"No, not at all. No idea who she is."

"What?"

"Er, I mean, I only 'know her' in the sense that I've talked to her before. Basically, uh...she'd always say hi back when I used to stand around here a lot."

"You...stood around?"

"Yeah."

Doing what? Selling postcards with trite little aphorisms on them? Singing off-

key at the top of his lungs?

“C’mere a sec.” He waved me over to the handrail and gestured down at the vast pedestrian crossing below. “See, I’d stand right here, look down over the edge of the bridge, and practice my live commentary. As soon as the light turned green, I’d go, ‘And they’re off! The man in the black leather jacket takes the lead! But the group of middle-aged businessmen are closing in—yes! They’ve cut ahead!’ Y’know, stuff like that. And that lady from earlier? Yeah, she originally thought I was planning to jump off. Came up to me and told me not to do it. I must’ve looked pretty crazy standing here muttering to myself, huh?”

“Oh...er...” I was genuinely at a loss for words. “So you came here and practiced every day?”

“Yeah, just about. I admit I lucked into the job with Asabi, but whenever I thought about what I wanted to do with my future, I always thought, well, I like sports, so maybe I could be a commentator.”

He peered over the rail and smiled fondly at the people walking below.

“I’d come here whenever I had free time, but on weekends I’d go to the horse track or the ballpark or the soccer stadium—anywhere I could practice my commentary—and when I got home I’d turn on the TV or the radio and compare notes with the actual commentators. Then...I think it was in July? They told me I’d get my big professional debut in the fall, and I was so excited! But then later they said they wanted to put me on *The News* instead, and real talk, I was kinda against it. I just didn’t understand why, y’know? My boss kept saying, ‘This is a huge opportunity for you! You’ll be famous!’ and I was like, ‘I never asked for this!’ Y’know?”

So this is what Shitara meant when he said Tatsuki “threw a fit.”

Meanwhile, Tatsuki noticed his hand was grimy with rust from the handrail. He drew it to his nose. “Smells like metal.”

What are you, a child? On second thought, yes, you are. You’re my polar opposite—you have absolutely no filter. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I have a decent amount of fun doing my current job, so in the

end, it all worked out. Plus, I'm learning a lot. And I got to make friends with you."

We are not friends, thank you very much. "Glad to hear you're having fun," I replied vaguely...but on the inside, I was pissed. I wanted Tatsuki to be a carefree idiot with just enough sense to help him skate by. I didn't want to learn anything about the real him. But now it was looking like Ushio was right.

You never know—he might be busting his ass behind the scenes, or maybe there's more to him than meets the eye.

"Let's get going, Kunieda-san."

"Oh, right. Sorry, I got a bit lost in thought."

"By the way—that stuff I said during the interview? I wasn't joking around."

"Huh?"

It was the first time I'd ever seen the real Tatsuki behind his "lovable puppydog" persona, and the look in his eye was uncharacteristically intense.

"When I walked into that room, I was completely blown away. I'd met other TV personalities in the past, but you? How do I put it—you have this incredible presence about you. It's like...being seen is your job, and you're fully committed. I was starstruck."

"I think you're giving me a little too much credit," I replied. This was my go-to line when I needed to dodge a compliment. But, like any good hunting dog, Tatsuki blocked my escape, circling in front of my averted gaze. His vigilant attention was discomforting.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"What?"

"You haven't seemed like yourself today. I get the sense that you're kinda... forcing it? Not that that was gonna stop me from bringing you, obviously, but..."

"No... I'm fine."

Here I was, with my "perfect smile" output cranked up to 120 percent, and yet somehow he had seen right through me. To me, this discrepancy was a fatal

error...and yet I decided to blame it on Ushio instead. *This is your fault, got it?!*

Meanwhile, externally, I conducted myself with the utmost grace.

“Thank you for your concern.”

When we returned to the newsroom, a handful of people rushed over to find out if Tatsuki had successfully acquired his new clothes.

Is this guy made of honey or something? Shoo, flies. This isn't some backwater town—surely you all have better things to do than hang on this kid's every word.

“Yep, I'm all set! Thanks for asking!”

“Show us!”

“They're getting tailored right now, so I can't bring them in until tomorrow.”

“I told you I was more than happy to tag along! Why'd you have to drag poor Kunieda-kun with you? He's a busy guy, you know!”

Damn right I am.

But as I slowly slipped away from the crowd, the next thing Tatsuki said stopped me dead in my tracks.

“You were just complaining to me about how jealous your boyfriend gets, remember? I don't want him to beat my ass for hanging out with you!”

Jealous... Hanging out...

I hope you and Minagawa-kun have a nice little shopping trip together. Too bad I'll never know what that's like.

I could feel a gasp welling up in my throat, so I snuck away to the fire escape.

Prior to now, I'd never given much thought to Ushio's last words—I was too pissed off about the rest of the conversation to care—but now it all clicked. *What, we've never gone shopping together? That can't be right.* I mobilized the full extent of my photographic memory and...sure enough, we hadn't. On weekdays I'd come over late at night, pass out, and leave in the morning; on weekends, well...again, I mostly slept. But he'd never complained about it, so I never knew he was dissatisfied.

You should've just told me. Sure, I might not want to strut around town in my Kunieda Kei persona, but I wouldn't mind swinging by the neighborhood izakaya or something. I'm not that heartless. Which is exactly why I was so hung up on this issue to begin with. I couldn't believe a guy as blunt and upfront as Ushio would bottle up his resentment until it exploded. Was he trying to put my needs first, since he knew being in public wore me out? Exactly how much was he tolerating in self-sacrificial silence?

Unfortunately, these extremely valid concerns were ultimately drowned out as I basked in the sweet bliss offered to me by the concept of Ushio's jealousy. Instantly my bad mood was gone. If anything, I'd have to fight to keep a smile off my face at this point.

He's jealous? Of Minagawa? That grouchy look on his face was all because he was jealous? What an imbecile. If I'd known he felt that way, I would've at least tried to make him feel better... Damn it, now I'm grinning like an idiot!

I kneaded my face like clay, desperate to get it back into its usual "Kunieda Kei" shape. I still had the whole day ahead of me; the fun part was yet to come. But when I stepped back into the hallway, I bumped into Tatsuki.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, startled.

Then he began to scrutinize my face, and I panicked internally, wondering if I'd failed to put it back to normal.

"You're looking a lot better now! Glad to see it."

The hell do you want with me, anyway?

I stepped inside Ushio's empty house. The heater was off, but I wasn't cold—my heart was pumping hard as I imagined the revenge I was about to exact. He must've left in a hurry, because the bed was a mess; his short-sleeved pajama shirt lay discarded on top of the rumpled bedspread. Now that it was nearly winter, you'd think he'd wear something with long sleeves instead, but no. Instead he'd cling to me for extra warmth, and I'd—*never mind. Don't get distracted.*

Ignoring the shirt, I flopped down onto the bed, took out my cell phone, and

dialed Ushio's number. I didn't give a rat's ass about the time difference, either—I was going to let it ring until he answered it.

"Hello?" Ushio answered offhandedly. *Dumbass.*

Then I hit him with the line I'd been preparing all day: "If you're going to be jealous, be cuter about it."

How'd ya like that? Sucks to have your words thrown right back in your face, doesn't it? So what'll it be—will you play dumb? Get mad? Maybe even get embarrassed for a change? Wait...I won't be able to see his face over the phone. Damn it.

Instead, all I got was a monotone, "Oh, I see. You finally put two and two together, huh? You must be really slow on the uptake."

"What?!"

"Not only that, but you actually called me up to rub it in my face? You truly are stupid. Not that I wasn't already aware, of course, but good god. Absolutely clueless."

Dumbfounded, I blinked, and just like that, my plan to dunk on him went out the window. *What the hell? I thought I had the upper hand here. How did he turn the tables?*

"But at least you bothered calling at all, so I guess I'll forgive you."

"*Excuse me?!*" My mind went white, and the blood rushed to my head. "Give me a freakin' break! I don't need your forgiveness, okay? I just—"

"I know, I know. You were just so overjoyed at the thought of me getting jealous that you couldn't help but try to rub it in."

"No!"

I flailed around on Ushio's giant bed, making good use of the excess space. Then it occurred to me that I could just hang up on him, so I pulled the phone away from my ear—but just then, with eerily perfect timing, I heard him say, "Don't you hang up on me."

"Do you have spy cameras in here or something?!"

“Huh? Oh, are you at my house? Awesome. Could you do me a solid and throw out that moldy old ham for me?”

“Do it yourself!”

“Now, now, let’s both settle down and talk.”

“What about my phone bill?”

“It’s fine. I’ll pay for it.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, yes, I promise.” Judging from the tone of his voice, he knew full well I didn’t actually give a damn about the international calling rate.

His usual teasing smile came to mind so vividly, it was like he was already home again. It drove me up the wall, and yet at the same time, I sorely felt its absence. Not that I would ever admit it.

“How’ve you been?” he asked.

I snorted. “Dude, it’s only been two days.”

“Okay then, uh...do you miss me?”

“Did you freaking listen to a word I just said?”

“Okay, well, I miss you.”

Oh really now, I thought sardonically. Says the guy who’ll leave town for some wedding that isn’t even technically work-related? You know, I forgot just how many people seem to gravitate to you. Me personally, I never needed anyone, but now I have you, and now I need you, and it’s your fault, so man the hell up and make it right, dipshit! You probably don’t even mean a word of it!

“Liar!”

“I’m not lying.”

I hated the fact that the mere *suggestion* of a smile on his end made me feel better.

“Are you still sulking?” he asked.

“I’m not sulking.”

“Then why don’t we have a nice friendly chat?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you wearing?”

“What...?” I was wearing my hobo disguise, obviously. Generally speaking, when it came to my off-hours, I always wore variations of the same generic store-brand tracksuit. “You know, the usual.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Then don’t ask!”

“Oh, cool your jets. Okay then, where are you right now?”

“Like I said, I’m at your house... Are you jet-lagged or something? I’m gonna hang up.”

“Don’t you dare,” he shot back in a less-than-commanding voice. “You’re so dense,” he muttered under his breath—but still loud enough for me to catch it.

“Hey!”

“Are you on the second floor? In my bed? I bet you are.”

“I told you—” *Don’t ask me questions you already know the answer to!* But before I could get the words out, I was interrupted by a confusing order:

“Touch it.”

“Huh?”

Glancing around, I pressed my hand against the wall experimentally. Was there some kind of hidden compartment with treasure inside? But no matter how I tapped the walls, floor, or bedframe, nothing seemed to happen. What I thought was a simple (if aggressive) command was now a total mystery.

“Touch what?” I asked, annoyed.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re so goddamn dense.”

“And you’re so goddamn vague!”

“I’m telling you to touch the thing you think I’d touch if I was there with you.”

“Huh...?”

Belatedly, I put two and two together. When he said a “friendly chat,” what he meant was—

“You...idiot!” I could feel all the blood in my body rushing to my head, to the point that I started to worry my phone might melt. “Are you literally an idiot?!”

“Didn’t you just answer that question for yourself?”

“Shut the hell up! You’re an idiot! And a sick freak!”

“How do you figure?” Ushio asked calmly. “Maybe it’d be kinky if we were in the same room, but long-distance phone sex is pretty normal, I feel like.”

He was so utterly unruffled that for a moment I was inclined to agree with him...but then I caught myself. “Like hell it is! Normal people don’t have phone sex while they’re staying at a friend’s house!”

“I’m upstairs alone. And unlike you, I don’t make a lot of noise, so I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I do *not* make noise in bed!”

And even if I did, whose fault do you think that would be?! In my line of work, my face and voice are my lifeline, and yet you never cut me a break, no matter what day of the week—gah! No! Don’t think about it!

“Besides,” Ushio continued in a casual tone, “if you really didn’t want to, you could always just hang up. Not like I can force you into it.”

Of course! Why didn’t I think of that?

Now that this was pointed out to me, however, I couldn’t will myself to pull the phone away from my ear. My mind was too busy imagining the milky white fog my breath was leaving on my phone screen... Crazy to think that, right this moment, it was tickling Ushio’s ear from an entire ocean away.

“Now touch it,” he repeated. But this time his tone was entirely different.

“What part...?” I asked, like the biggest idiot ever.

Evidently this pleased him, somehow. “Any part,” he replied, the smile audible in his voice. “Whichever part you’d want me to touch...or a part you think I’d want to touch.”

“How should I know?”

“Oh, okay. You want me to spell it out for you that badly, hmm? You perv,” he teased me in an uncharacteristically sensual voice. My mind and tongue went dull, as if he had drizzled me in syrup. “This is embarrassing for me, too, y’know.”

As if. “You liar.”

“If anyone’s a liar, it’s you.”

“Shut the hell up.”

His breath rustled the invisible radio waves. I set my phone to speaker mode and set it on the pillow next to me. Then I lay down on my side facing the wall, slid my hand into the pocket of my tracksuit, and gingerly felt my package through the fabric. It was a lot warmer than I was expecting it to be.

“You touching it?” Ushio pressed, egging me on.

“Well...you...!”

“Hmm?”

“You’re the one who keeps begging me to do this... It’s not my fetish or anything... I’m just humoring you, that’s all...”

“Right. Of course,” he replied—actually validating me for a change. “It’s all my fault, and I’m the only one listening, so go ahead and have at it.”

Spurred on by his encouragement—or, should I say, led into temptation by his sweet whispers—I reached and ran my fingers back and forth along my shaft, aroused by a guy who wasn’t even in the room with me.

“Mm...”

Come to think of it, I hadn’t masturbated in a long time; with an active sex life, I never really felt the urge. It was strange to think I actually kind of missed the touch of my own hand... Fortunately, masturbating was like riding a bicycle—you never really forgot how to do it.

“Mmm...!”

“Where are you touching?”

“Not telling!”

“Then moan a little louder so I can hear you.”

“Excuse me?” *I’m a little busy taking cues from something else right now, in case you haven’t noticed. How am I supposed to moan on command?* “Quit bossing me around.”

“Hmmm...”

I could practically see him tilting his head in contemplation. Not that I especially wanted to keep doing this, but if he called the whole thing off just because I refused to take orders, I was going to be pissed.

What came next, however, was a voice so low and scratchy, it almost felt like a cat had licked my eardrum.

“Kei.”

I should have been used to him calling my name during sex, but somehow it sounded different over the phone...almost like it was another man speaking.

“Grab it and rub it real slow. Just three fingers is fine.”

“Excuse you...?”

“I said do it.”

“I don’t want to.”

“There you go, lying again. Just keep rubbing it with three fingers. Once it gets hard, focus on the head. That’s what you like, right?”

“I said, I don’t want to—”

“You like it when I squeeze the head and start playing with the hole with my thumb, yeah? It gets you wet so fast. Makes you moan like crazy.”

“Stop!” I shook my head vigorously—*I don’t wanna know about that!*—and yet I didn’t reach over to end the call.

“Kei...”

His voice was sweet poison.

“Do it, Kei. I want to get off to your moans.”

His husky voice was interspersed with metallic clicks—probably the sound of him unbuckling his belt. The thought of him joining me kindled my smoldering desire until it caught fire.

“Aah...aah...!”

“There you go. See? I knew you could do it.”

Per his instructions, I caressed my cock the same way he always did. My body could vividly recall the sensation of his palm...the length of his fingers... It added a degree of separation between me and my member.

“Nnn...mm...aah!”

“Pace yourself, now. I know you’ll want to cum as fast as possible, but try to be patient.”

“Yeah, well...that’s your fault...!”

“No it isn’t.” The whisper was half amusement, half lust. “If anything, it’s *your* fault for making me want to torment you... Your face, your voice, your body... Filthy boy.”

“Shut up!”

As we argued, my motions continued, faithfully recreating Ushio’s preferred style of grip. Precum leaked from my tip and met my fingers; my slick strokes spread pleasure throughout my lower body, and I could tell without looking that my fluids were steadily shifting from clear to milky white.

“Gah...aah...aaahh...!”

“Man, technology is incredible. I can literally *hear* how wet you are.”

“Stop!”

“You gonna touch your nipples?”

This time it wasn’t a command, but a question—probably because he knew by this point I’d do whatever he suggested regardless. As my fully engorged shaft throbbed uncomfortably, I asked, “Whi...?”

“What was that?”

“I said...which one...?” My ear burned hot against the pillow.

“Fuck, that was hot,” Ushio snickered devilishly. “Whichever one you want, cutie.”

I obediently slid a hand under my shirt. No need to fumble around for it—it was standing at attention, just like the rest of me. This caught me off guard. At my touch, a tiny wave of pleasure rippled through me, like a drop in a bucket.

“Aah...mmm...!”

“Which one are you touching?”

“The left...”

“Oh, is that your favorite? I’ll have to remember that.”

I could have explained to him that it was simply the nipple my free hand had the easiest time reaching, but I was more focused on playing with myself.

“Aah! Aaahh!”

“How’s it feel?”

“Aah... It’s getting harder...!”

“Good. I wish I could pinch it.”

“Mmm...!”

The pleasure from this small yet firm protrusion mingled with that of my groin, pushing me to stroke faster than ever before.

“Aaahh...nnng...aah!”

“Kei...does it feel good?”

“Yeah...it’s good...!”

“You wanna touch your butt...?”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?”

“I only let *you* do that!”

“Damn it...that almost made me cum.”

Judging from the sharp inhale of breath moments prior to that statement, I

wagered he was being truthful.

“Aah...aah... I’m gonna cum...!”

My precum was flowing out so thickly, I couldn’t believe I had that much in me. Chills ran down my spine at the sheer viscosity. Meanwhile, I buried my face into Ushio’s discarded pajama shirt and breathed in his scent.

“Wanna cum together?”

“Yeah...!”

“Rub it as fast as you can.”

“Aaaahh! Aah...aah...Ushio...!”

As I applied friction to my length, I crushed my nipple between my fingers and traced circles around it—anything to heighten my pleasure. My heart pounded in my ears along with Ushio’s labored breathing.

“Kei...!”

“Aah!” My hips jerked upwards reflexively as my desire burst forth from the depths of my core, soiling my hand and underwear. “Haah...”

“Did you cum?”

“Yeah.” As my gasps slowed, so too did I come back to my senses. “Anyway, I’m gonna hang up now,” I announced as brusquely as possible.

“Let’s do this again sometime.”

“Like hell I will! From now on, I’m only talking to you through e-mail, so you better check your inbox!”

Once I said my piece, I hung up without waiting for his response. Then, after I got back from my shower, I found an e-mail waiting for me: *What color are your boxers?*

I flung my phone against the pillow.

Go to hell!

According to an e-mail I received from Ushio, he was scheduled to fly back

home in about a week. *Man, where do you find the time to send me all these e-mails?* I rose from my seat and left my newsroom desk in search of a more private location. In the end, I found myself in the SCR for *The News*.

Monitors covered the wall in perfectly even rectangles, like a chocolate bar. Each of them had their own separate purpose, but right now they were all dark, and the chairs that normally held the SCR staff were neatly pushed in under the desk. The room was temperature-controlled to prevent overheating—both for the machines and the humans—but as a result, it was rather chilly when the machines were off. Shivering, I took out my phone.

“Oh, hey!” Ushio answered. “What’s up? Did you change your mind about phone sex?”

“No!”

My voice echoed loudly through the empty room. *Eh, the SCR’s soundproof anyway*, I figured. That, and we didn’t broadcast on Saturdays, so no one had any reason to come by...and even if they did, I’d hear the door mechanism beep with enough time to hang up the phone and make some excuse. That was my plan, anyway.

“Well, you’re doing *such* a good job e-mailing me constantly, I thought I’d call and let you know,” I said.

“Thanks! I try. Anyway, where are you? Your voice sounds echoey.”

“At work.”

“You didn’t get the day off?”

“Thanks to my incompetent director and his piss-poor managing, we had to reshoot some footage. Plus, I forgot to expense my business trip, so I had to get that sorted out.”

“Hard to believe *the* Kunieda Kei forgot something.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Is the loneliness getting to you?”

“As if! If anything, I bet you’re so homesick you’re crying yourself to sleep every night.”

“Ha ha! Yeah, totally.”

As we talked, I paced back and forth in front of the mixing board. “Well, since I’m in a generous mood,” I began, “I’m thinking maybe after you get home I could take you out sometime. You know, the next time I’m free.”

“Really?” Ushio asked, sounding surprised. “Like where?”

“I don’t know, the ramen place?”

“Restaurants don’t count! Meh, whatever. I’m holding you to that, got it? When I get back, we’re going on a date.”

“Good.” I let out a sigh as I hung up the phone. *Date. Heh.*

Just then, I heard a clattering sound somewhere within the sea of computer desks in the opposite corner of the room—the place where they design all the title cards and 3D graphics and whatnot.

The next few seconds played out in slow motion. A chair scooted away from its desk. And then someone crawled out from under said desk.

“Oh, hey... Nice to see you,” said Tatsuki.

Then the world returned to its normal speed and I realized I wasn’t dreaming.

“In case you were wondering what I was doing in here...”

I wasn’t, but whatever.

“I was trying to get concert tickets, y’know, the kind you can only get by calling in. And you know how some of the phones here have *wireless priority* or whatever it’s called where your call gets bumped up in the queue? Well, I asked around, and someone told me the phone in the SCR has it enabled, so I snuck in and gave it a try. Sure enough, I got through on the first try! Got my tickets and everything! So I was like ‘Hell yeah!’ But then I heard the door open, so I panicked and hid.”

I said nothing—just stood there and listened. Didn’t even nod along.

“So yeah, I got two tickets to see Mr. Children. Would you wanna come?”

Again, I didn’t respond. Instead, I slowly scanned the room.

“Looking for something?”

“A blunt weapon.”

“What?”

“So I can beat you to death.”

“Awww, c’mon! I don’t wanna die!”

“Cram it!”

My mind was a Molotov cocktail of panic and regret and shame, and Tatsuki’s derpy voice was the spark that set it off.

“AAARGH!” I clutched at my hair with both hands and ruffled it in frustration. I wanted nothing more than to transform into Godzilla and crush this entire building underfoot. “Why you? Why is it always *you*?! God, you piss me off, you obnoxious little gnat! Always hovering around me! If I had a Death Note right now, I would write your fucking name in it!”

Yes, you read that right—I had given up on any hope of smoothing things over as Kunieda Kei, so instead I screamed at him in my natural voice. Granted, just because he’d overheard my more dickish side didn’t mean he’d found out everything about my personal life...but now that he knew how two-faced I was, as far as I was concerned, it was game over. *Fuck it. I’ll fly to America myself.*

Tatsuki stared at me, his eyes round as saucers. “Holy crap,” he whispered. Then he burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha, oh my god! You’re a riot, Kunieda-san! A Death Note? My sides!”

He wasn’t trying to mock me—he genuinely found it funny. This confused me, since I was really expecting him to shout back, or at least flinch away. I furrowed my brow. “The hell is wrong with you?”

“I should ask the same of you!” he replied. Given what he’d witnessed, I couldn’t pretend he didn’t have a point.

“I...”

“Nah, I get it. Basically, you put on an act in public, right?”

I didn’t appreciate him writing off my diligent efforts as merely “putting on an

act,” but nevertheless, I nodded reluctantly.

“Man, that’s crazy! But like, why would you even bother? Isn’t it tiring?”

“None of your business. I can live my life however I want.”

“Hey man, no judgment! Either way, you gotta do it when the cameras are rolling, right? Besides, I like both sides of you.”

“You haven’t even met both sides of me.”

“Mmm...I feel like I have, though.”

“Excuse me?” *Don’t be ridiculous, you little shit.*

“You know that interview story I talked about the other day? When I hit on you and you shrugged it off?”

“What about it?”

“You were smiling, but your eyes were just...*cold*. Empty. I was right up in your face, too, so I got a good look, and...man, I was scared for my life that day. Sent shivers down my spine,” he explained in a casual tone that didn’t sound scared in the least. “Like, it definitely got me wondering, but we never really talked, and no one ever had anything bad to say about you. To them, you’re the guy everyone wishes they were—you’re kind, you’re responsible, you’re good at your job... Which is good and all, but it started to make me think maybe it was all in my head, y’know? So when they put me on the same show as you, as much as I resisted at first, I decided it was a good opportunity to get to know you.”

“So that’s why you always hover around me?”

“Don’t get me wrong—I wasn’t trying to investigate you or anything like that. I just sincerely wanted to get to know you better.”

I folded my arms and leaned against a nearby desk. “Well?”

“‘Well,’ what?”

“Uh, hello? You’ve seen right through me! Congratulations! I have a big, fake persona I wear every day! And you wanna know why I wear it? So people will kiss my ass! I love being everyone’s favorite! It’s never caused any problems for

anyone, either! The end!”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

What are you, an alien? I wondered. In fact, I was half-inclined to believe he actually was. He didn’t seem to understand a single word I was saying.

“So anyway, who was that on the phone just now?”

“None of your business.”

“Was it Tsuzuki-san?”

“*What?!*”

This was number two on my short list of subjects I never wanted to discuss with anyone, and I found myself once again tempted to kill him.

“You got a hidden camera or a bug in here?! Huh?!”

“No, I don’t! It was half guesswork, I swear!”

“Then where did the other half come from? You’ve only met him once!”

“Mmmm...” Tatsuki folded his arms as if to mirror me, then stared up at the darkened monitors. “You remember I told you about my commentary practice? It’s weird—after all the people watching I’ve done, I’ve gotten real good at noticing stuff. Even when they’re just innocently crossing the street, I can tell stuff like, ‘Oh hey, that guy’s in a good mood,’ or ‘That couple’s in the middle of a fight right now.’ I guess it’s a skill I’ve developed? Not to brag or anything. But yeah, after we had dinner together that one night, you and Tsuzuki-san walked off together, right?”

“We live in the same neighborhood, so I offered to share a taxi, that’s all.”

“Okay, but still... Not that you guys were walking arm in arm or anything, but I got a vibe that you were more than just casual acquaintances...which would mean that you pretended to barely know each other on purpose...which would mean you have something to hide.”

It was then that I realized I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. Tatsuki’s instincts about me were right on the money—as were my instincts warning me to avoid him. That was a red flag I never should have ignored, and now I was

paying the price. He knew everything...and I needed to do something fast...but instead my brain just kept screaming, *FUCK, FUCK, FUCK* without actually attempting to brainstorm anything. *Where's Ushio when I need him most?*

"You guys are an item, aren't you? Judging from the phone call, anyway."

"You think you're some kind of investigative journalist? Is that it?"

"Who, me? No way," he replied, staring back at me blankly.

Honestly, I deserved an award for somehow not punching his stupid puppy face.

"I'm really not some kinda master of observation. I only figured it out because I pay a lot of attention to you on the regular."

"Wow. Creepy *and* pathetic."

At that point in time, I no longer had the option of asking him to keep quiet; I'd rather die.

"Ouch! That was harsh, man. Can you cut me a break? I'm already struggling with this as it is."

"Oh, you think you're struggling?"

"Dude, not only did I just find out you have a boyfriend, I overheard you being all lovey-dovey on the phone with him!"

"I was not being 'lovey-dovey'!"

"Ugh, and now you're blushing... I don't suppose you plan to dump him anytime soon, do you?"

"The hell are you talking about...?"

"If not, that's okay too. I enjoy the chase."

"I don't give a rat's ass what you enjoy!"

"That right there? That vitriol? Ooh, it makes me shiver. There's something special about getting perfect, princely Kunieda-san to cuss me out."

"Seriously, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Sometimes you can be really dense... Don't worry—I love you anyway."

First I self-destructed, and then Tatsuki dropped a bomb of his own. At this point I had nothing left to lose, so I donned a cheerful smile and announced, with all the sincerity I could muster: “I hope you die and go to hell. And when you get there, I hope you die again.”

“Whoa. No one’s ever responded to my ‘I love you’ with ‘go to hell’ before.”

“Are you trying to screw with me?”

“As long as you consent, yes please!”

“You think you’re so funny, don’t you? This is what I can’t stand about you. Why would you choose this very moment to profess your feelings? You think anyone’s gonna take you seriously? Besides, everyone at Asabi knows you’re a total mixer fiend.”

“I just like meeting people outside of our industry! Only reason I go is to chat. If you want me to stop, I will.”

“Dude, I don’t care what you do! It’s none of my business! My point is, don’t joke about that crap. It’s not funny, asshole.”

“You really think I would joke about this?”

He pouted his lips in protest. Then his expression shifted to the same intense look I saw on the pedestrian bridge.

“You remember I told you I wasn’t joking around during my interview?”

I fell silent. My fingers tightened around my bicep.

“Right from the very moment I first met you, you’ve been all I can think about. No one else has ever made me feel this way, Kunieda-san. At first I kinda hesitated, what with you being a guy and all, but after hearing that phone call...I mean, obviously it was crushing in a way, but...I figure if you can swing that way for Tsuzuki-san, then maybe I have a shot, too.”

“No, you don’t!”

“Huh? How come? ...Oh, sorry!” His phone started to beep in his pocket. He pulled it out and turned off the alarm. “I forgot I have a voiceover recording

starting at two. I gotta go!”

And so he hurried out of the room, leaving our conflict unresolved. (Not that there was really any way to resolve it.) Left alone in the SCR, I unfolded my arms, held up a hand, and started to count:

Okay, so...he found out about the real me...he found out about me and Ushio...and then he confessed his feelings to me...

I stared down at my three curled fingers for a moment, then tilted my head up and screamed at the top of my lungs:

“THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING!”

Error! Does not compute! Someone get me out of here!

Part of me was tempted to call Ushio back right away, but I couldn’t risk anyone else finding out. So instead I went home, locked all my doors and windows (including the balcony), then dialed his number.

“What do you want?”

“The cat’s out of the bag.”

It was the only way I could think to describe it. Meanwhile, the one remaining functional part of my brain noted that I was evidently still pretty shaken up.

“What? What do you mean?”

“All my secrets! Everything! Fuck it—I’m gonna catch a red-eye flight to wherever you are. I’ll live there and eat hamburgers and...I don’t know! Whatever fried foods they have!”

“They have a lot of fried foods here, so you’ll have to be more specific. Look, just calm down and tell me what happened, would you?”

“Promise me you won’t get mad.”

“I won’t know until you tell me... All right, fine. I promise I won’t get mad. Now out with it.”

So I told him everything that had happened back in the SCR. Naturally, this included the part where Tatsuki confessed his love to me.

Ushio fell silent for a moment. “So, what are you gonna do?” he asked casually.

Don't you care?! I fumed internally. “How should I know?!”

But Ushio didn't miss a beat. “Be honest with me,” he replied calmly. “How do you actually feel about him?”

“Excuse me?” Unfortunately, I was in no condition to smirk to myself about his jealousy this time around. “This shit again?” I adjusted my grip on my phone. “Look, I don't give a shit about him. Can't you tell?”

“No, I can't tell. That's why I asked.”

What, are you blind?

There I was, standing around awkwardly in my own house as though I wasn't sure where I was allowed to sit.

“If you actually didn't care about Minagawa, you wouldn't complain about him every day,” Ushio insisted. “You'd just shrug him off and forget about him. The second I met him, I knew: he's not like the others—he's the kind of guy who'd pursue you. Aggressively. And I knew you'd noticed—you just didn't know how to handle it.”

Of course I'd noticed. Normally I could weasel out of any unwanted invitations by smiling awkwardly and letting the other person take the hint, but Tatsuki? Tatsuki didn't get hints. He barreled through them at a hundred miles an hour.

“That's...stupid.”

That was the most I could say. I knew I needed to deny any interest in Tatsuki...but over the phone, I wasn't confident I had the persuasive ability to make it stick. I couldn't will myself to find the words. Besides, Ushio knew me better than anyone—maybe he was right about me.

“I've been wondering what to do about it, actually. I could tell right away that Minagawa was into you, but even if I forbade you from talking about him, I'd still get paranoid... Plus, not like I can ban you from ever talking to someone at your job... Hey, Kei?”

At the sound of my name, I braced myself. “Yeah?”

“I told you I love both sides of you. That it keeps things interesting. And I still feel that way. But...he probably feels that way about you, too. So how are you going to react?”

The other me—the real me—was once a secret that only my parents knew. Then Ushio found out. And now it had spread even further.

“To be honest, I thought I was safe. That no one else would ever find out about the real you. But Minagawa has, and now he’s standing on the same playing field as me.”

“I told you, I shot him down.”

“And did he take no for an answer?”

“I...don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” He let out a hollow laugh; it was the first time he’d ever scoffed at me. “Seriously, man, think about it. What if he tells you he’ll only keep quiet if you agree to date him?”

“Huh. I didn’t think of that.”

Oops. I meant it more like “it didn’t occur to me that he might try that”—I couldn’t picture Tatsuki ever resorting to underhanded means—but it came out sounding an awful lot like I thought it was a good idea.

Naturally, Ushio was pissed. “Excuse me? What, are you going to suggest it to him yourself?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“You can be so careless, you know that? You think you’re smart, but you can be a real idiot. Sometimes you don’t think critically at all.”

“You promised you wouldn’t get mad!”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should promise not to be an asshole!”

Pot, meet kettle! I couldn’t bring myself to back down. “This all happened because you keep e-mailing me.”

“You’re the one who told me to e-mail you!”

“Ugh, forget it! You’re useless! You’re not helping me solve this—you’re just

making me feel worse! Don't even bother coming back to Japan!"

The instant I said it, I knew I had gone too far—but it was too late.

"Fine," he replied in an icy voice. "I won't." And then the call went silent.

My hand lowered back to my side, still clutching my leaden phone. I couldn't even find the energy to scream. I was an asshole, all right—I should've told Ushio that I loved him too much to mess around with Tatsuki, but I didn't. At the same time, however, I wanted him to tell me not to choose Tatsuki. I wanted him to fight for me.

My heart felt like it was caught in a tug-of-war between my ego and his...and it hurt.

On Monday, after the broadcast, Tatsuki came jogging over. "Sorry to bother you!"

"Do you need something?" I asked in my Kunieda Kei voice, since other people were present. Likewise, he didn't comment on my tone.

"See, the thing is, my voiceover recording didn't go too well," he sighed. "It was my first time doing that documentary-style voice, and...I mean, the director said he chose me on purpose to create a contrast, but...I guess the contrast was too big? And uneven in some parts, since it was such a long take? So they decided I have to retake it, but the director told me he wants me to study up beforehand. Anyway, you remember a couple years ago when you did that one voiceover? The one about the Buddha statue restoration?"

"Yes?"

"Well, apparently that's what they're going for. But when I went to check it out from the repository, they said the cultural resource division is using it right now...so I thought I'd ask if maybe you had a DVD of it lying around that I could borrow."

"I do, actually. Would you like to come by my place and pick it up?" I suggested with a soft smile.

"You mean it?"

“Of course. No sense in making you wait—I imagine they’re going to want that recording done sooner rather than later.”

“You’re the best!”

I couldn’t see any possible compromise between Tatsuki and I, but nevertheless, I knew I couldn’t let my unspoken secret fester. Even if the DVD was just a plausible excuse to get him alone, he’d been the one to make the request, and that worked in my favor.

So I forced my way into the passenger seat of a taxi and reluctantly took him home with me, like leftovers I didn’t want. It was the first time anyone other than Ushio had visited my apartment; guilt nibbled at me as I inserted the key into the lock.

Relax. We’re not doing anything inappropriate, I told myself. I need to put this conversation to rest, that’s all.

Meanwhile, Tatsuki didn’t sound nervous in the least.

“Thanks for having me over. Ooh, is that *HUNTER*×
HUNTER?! Can I read it?”

“Lay one finger on my stuff and I’ll beat your ass.”

“Wow. Is that really how you’re gonna talk to me when we’re alone?”

“Quit your bitching and settle down. You can sit right over there on that couch. Just try not to breathe my air.”

“I can’t even breathe? Are you trying to kill me?”

“If I’m lucky.” I pulled the DVD in question from the shelf and chucked the jewel case at him like it was a frisbee.

“Whoa! Almost dropped it... Thanks a bunch. When do you need it back?”

“I don’t ‘need’ it at all.”

“I can keep it?! Score!”

“Now scoot over... *All* the way over.”

Once I made sure Tatsuki was sitting on the very edge of the couch, I sat down on the opposite edge.

“This is a little unnatural, don’t you think...?” he asked.

“I don’t care.”

“So where’s your bedroom? Is it in there?”

“Why the hell would I give you that information?!”

“I’m just curious, man! Has Tsuzuki-san been here before? I bet he has. Can I ask how you two got together?”

“Go to hell!”

“I like him. Really down-to-earth and fun to talk to. Plus, he’s hot.”

“What?!” *Wait...was he after Ushio the whole time?*

Tatsuki saw the growing confusion on my face and burst out laughing. “Relax! I don’t mean it like that. You’ve never had a real relationship before, have you, Kunieda-san?”

“Says the guy who does nothing but hang around mixers.”

“Did Tsuzuki-san say anything about me?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, judging from what I heard during the phone call, it sounds like he’s out of town somewhere...but you probably still told him what I said to you, right?”

Tatsuki turned his entire body in my direction, resting his elbow against the back cushion as he gazed at the still tight knot of my tie.

God, I’m tired of wearing this crap. I wanna be me again.

Ruffling up my perfect hair, I decided to hit him with Ushio’s hypothesis. “He was worried that...you’d use your newfound knowledge to blackmail me into dating you.”

Tatsuki blinked at me, eyes wide. Then he pointed a finger at me. “Oh man, I should’ve thought of that! Yeah, that works for me!”

“Not happening!”

Why did he have to have the exact same delayed reaction I did? As much as I hated to admit it...maybe we were birds of a feather. Usually smart, but on

occasion, profoundly stupid.

“Yeah, you’re right. No point in blackmailing you into it.”

Good. But right as relief started to set in—

“But you know, Kunieda-san, I don’t think you hate me as much as you pretend to.”

“Oh yeah? Real confident about that, are you? What, you think everyone in the world loves you?”

“No, it’s not that. But I’m pretty sure I’d be able to tell if you hated my guts for real.”

Sounds pretty overconfident to me, you clown! I was tempted to shower him in insults like a hail of bullets, but I knew it would only forestall the conversation. Irritating as it was, Tatsuki already had a solid grasp of my personality. Swallowing my vitriol, I looked him right in the eye—or, I tried.

“Hey! I didn’t say to close your eyes!” I snapped. *Nor did I tell you to lean in, damn it!*

“Huh? Isn’t this the part where you kiss me?”

“I’m gonna sew your goddamn eyelids shut.” But I wasn’t as disgusted as I could have been. “This is what I don’t like about you,” I continued. “You’re shameless, self-assured, and a ridiculously fast learner...and you think you can get away with anything as long as you smile and play nice.”

Then, finally, I owned up to the inner workings of my heart.

“I...don’t especially wish I was like you, but...part of me does envy you. Which is why your behavior always pisses me off.”

“Whoa! You look up to me?! Aww, Kunieda-san! That’s so sweet!”

“Quit putting words in my mouth.”

“Everyone admires you, too, y’know,” he continued, inching toward me on his knees. “Your personality, your good looks, your talent...”

“That stuff’s all fake. It’s as staged as any TV show.”

“Yeah, yeah, you set it all up to get attention. And it worked. But somehow,

you're still jealous of me. You wanna know why that is? Because you're not content with just Tsuzuki-san. Part of you wants more than that."

My back was now pressed all the way against the armrest, my hand clinging to the back cushion.

"And you think *you* can fill that void?" I asked.

"I won't give you an ultimatum. You don't have to choose me over your main squeeze." He took me by the wrist. Then he leaned in, just like he did during his interview; it didn't make me weak in the knees, but I wasn't repulsed, either. Worst of all, he seemed so nonchalant about this proposal that it almost started to sound like a good idea. Not sure what that says about me as a person.

"You're already leading a double life at work, right? So just let me have that half. I'd feel bad if I came in and wrecked your relationship with Tsuzuki-san. But since we work together, I'm sure we'd have no trouble hiding it. So why not date me at work, then go home and date him? You think he'd get mad about it?"

"He's already mad," I replied, my voice hoarse. "He blew a gasket and said he wasn't coming home."

Sure, he might've only said it in the heat of the moment, but he was generally a man of his word...and with his freelance job, he could find ways to support himself just about anywhere...

"Oh, nice. Lucky me."

"Have some remorse for your actions, you ass!"

"I'll make it up to you, I promise... Can I kiss you?"

"What the hell for?"

"Don't pretend you don't know," he grinned, kicking my reservations to the curb. Unexpectedly sly of him, actually. "Now let me kiss you. I know you don't have the guts to be the bad guy yourself... Go ahead and blame it all on me."

He squeezed my hand and I noticed his was a bit sweaty. That was when I realized that maybe his confidence wasn't quite so bulletproof—an observation that sparked a hint of affection in me at the worst possible time. His was a

passion entirely unlike the admiration and praise I was used to...a passion I thought only Ushio could feel for me...

“I’m in love with you. I mean it.”

I feel nothing! I feel nothing! I feel nothing! But despite my claims to the contrary, my heart was already pounding. And while admittedly I did close my eyes, it was only a reflexive response to the foreign object approaching my face...I think...

“I can’t do this!”

Right as I thrust both hands out and pushed Tatsuki away, I heard my front door open. Naturally, there was only one person with a spare key. Thunderous footsteps barreled down the hall toward us, and the living room door flew open. I stared blankly.

“Good grief, Kunieda-san,” Tatsuki sighed, sounding utterly unruffled. “Times like these, you gotta remember to chain the door!”

“It’d take a lot more than that to keep me out,” Ushio replied, equally unperturbed.

“Fair enough! Anyway, I’m not trying to start a fight.”

How the hell are you people so calm? Am I the only one with my heart in my throat over here? Damn it, I need to say something!

Spurred on by inexplicable panic, I blurted out: “It’s not my fault! You said you weren’t coming back!”

Oh shit. That makes it sound like I was trying to cheat on him! One of those classic soap opera “you said you were going on a business trip” clichés!

As I panicked even harder, Ushio turned and glared daggers at me. “The fuck did you just say?”

“Uhhh... It was just a figure of speech...?”

“Last I checked, speech is supposed to be your area of expertise. Riddle me that.”

He hauled me off the couch, yanked me down to the floor, and slid an arm under each of my legs.

“Hey, wait... What are you doing...?”

“Punishing you.”

“What?!”

In this position?! Is he about to do what I think he’s about to do?! He wouldn’t, would he? But what else would my “punishment” be?!

“Stop it, dumbass!” I shouted, attempting to wriggle free. Unfortunately, he had both of my legs locked down. I was a sitting duck.

“You think you have any right to boss me around?”

“I just—we can’t do this! Not in public! We just can’t!”

Ushio let out a heavy sigh. “Moron.”

While still keeping hold of my legs, he got up, rolled me over, straddled my hips, then sat down on my back.

“Aaaaaggghh!”

Pain shot through me as my toes approached my skull.

“Stop it, you gorilla! That hurts!”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a punishment if it didn’t, now would it?”

“Wow. This is really something else,” Tatsuki murmured in admiration, like he was observing an ant farm.

“Don’t just sit there! Help me!” *Damn it, why isn’t he the one getting punished?!*

“What constitutes ‘help’ when he’s got you in a Boston crab maneuver? You want a towel or something?”

“You asshole!”

“If anyone’s an asshole, it’s you,” Ushio growled.

“Ow, ow, ow! That hurts!”

After Ushio finally finished venting his frustration on me, he released my legs. Then he turned to Tatsuki. “So, what did you two get up to?” he asked. “Anything I should be concerned about? I’m guessing yes.”

Hey dumbass, you’re crushing me!

“I tried to seduce him, and it seemed like it was working.”

You didn’t need to be that honest about it!

“Minagawa, you little bastard...”

Trapped beneath his weight, the most I could do was prop myself up on my elbows to raise my head—

“You stay out of this,” Ushio hissed at me. Then he turned back to Tatsuki. “So, what were you planning to do if he came around?”

“Mmm... Honestly, I wouldn’t ask him to break up with you or anything like that. I’m fine going halvesies with you, y’know?”

“Halfsies... Right.”

I turned my head as far as it would go, but all I could see was Ushio’s back.

“I gotta be honest, Minegawa-kun... Even after all this, I still can’t bring myself to hate you.”

“Oh yeah? Nice.”

“But you’re testing my *fucking* limits!” This guttural roar threatened to shake my apartment windows. Compared to this, my last phone call with him was practically civil. “Half and half? The fuck are you talking about? Give me a break, kid. Even assuming he was interested in you like that, I’d never hand him over to a loser who can’t commit. If you actually loved him, you’d want all of him for yourself. But no—you don’t respect him, you don’t respect yourself, you don’t respect the concept of love in general! You wanna flirt with another man’s boyfriend? Then be an adult about it, for fuck’s sake!”

Ushio fell perfectly still for a moment.

“Kei,” he continued without looking at me, “if you’re only going to give me half, then I’m not giving you my everything. You can have half, and I’ll find

someone else for the other half. Got it?”

“No!” I shot back without hesitation. “I don’t want that! Ever!”

I slumped back to the floor and shook my head, rubbing my forehead against the cold hardwood. I didn’t want to imagine Ushio with anyone else.

“If I had to share you, I’d go nuts,” I croaked, partially from the weight on my back and partially from suppressing the urge to cry. I loved Ushio, and both sides of myself were his alone. It had to be him. No one else would do.

I was an imbecile, and this was my wake-up call.



“Yeah, well, I feel the same way,” he said.

“Good...”

“Good.” He patted the back of my knee. “Now then, what do we say to Minagawa?”

“Uhhh... Get out?”

“Wrong!”

He twisted my legs again.

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow! Stop...freaking...doing that!”

“You led him on, so you need to apologize, damn it!”

“No! I don’t apologize to anyone!”

“Oh yeah? What about now?! Huh?!”

“Owww!” I flailed my limbs in agony.

It’s funny—you’d think it’d be kind of fun, being the apex of a love triangle. Instead I was one wrong move away from being on the receiving end of a piledriver.

“Oh no, that’s okay. No apology necessary,” Tatsuki said with an awkward smile. “Honestly, I was prepared to take a punch or two, y’know, anywhere except the face. But I gotta say...I think you two might just be perfect for each other.”

Gee, thanks. In any other situation, that would have been a flattering sentiment.

“Touch him again and I’ll beat your ass,” Ushio growled.

“Roger dodger! Won’t happen again,” Tatsuki replied with a firm salute.

“Okay then, I trust you. Oh, and—”

“Can you guys maybe have this conversation somewhere that isn’t literally on top of me?!”

But Ushio just ignored me. “Could you keep quiet about his...condition? I know he’s dumb as a brick, but it’s the way he was born, and I don’t want to

force him to be someone he's not. I want him to keep living his life just the way he is... Okay?"

"Oh, please," Tatsuki replied flippantly, dismissing Ushio's concern with a wave of the DVD jewel case in his hand. "You think anyone would believe a rookie like me if I tried to tell 'em our prince is a wolf in sheep's clothing? If anything, they'd think I was trying to sabotage his career, and the whole thing would backfire. Trust me, Kunieda-san's made a real name for himself. It's impressive stuff."

"Gotcha."

"Anyway, I'm heading out. Sorry for imposing...in more ways than one."

For the love of god, keep your little comments to yourself.

Ushio showed Tatsuki to the door, locked it behind him, then walked back into the living room, where I continued to lie on my stomach on the floor.

"What's the matter? Did it really hurt that bad? Want me to slap on a Salonpas or something?"

I shook my head silently and watched as my tears formed a warped little puddle on the hardwood. I knew I couldn't afford to let my eyes get puffy, and yet I just couldn't stop. It wasn't his anger toward me, or the physical abuse. It was the simple fact that he cared, above all else, that got to me. He loved all of me...and he loved me with all of him.

"C'mon, don't cry. I was just trying to teach you a lesson, that's all."

He lifted me up and guided me to the bedroom with uncommon tenderness; meanwhile, I continued to sob uncontrollably. Once we got to the bed, he sat me down and turned to go. Reflexively I grabbed the sleeve of his coat.

"I'm just gonna get an ice pack from the kitchen," he reassured me, wiping away my tears with a smile. "Can't let you go on TV looking like that, now, can we?"

He returned with an ice pack wrapped in a washcloth. As I held it against my eyes, he stroked my hair until I calmed down. Then, when I finally looked up, I found him gazing at me with a look so gentle I couldn't help but avert my eyes.

He said, "You go on TV every single night, and each time I watch you, I think to myself, 'Damn, that's impressive. He's so ridiculously good at his job.' But sometimes...I hate it. I hate that I have to share you with thousands of people across the country. Sometimes I get so mad, I turn the TV off."

"You're joking."

"Nope, I'm dead serious. If I offered to be your sugar daddy full time, would you quit your job and move in?"

"Hell no," I replied instantly. "I thrive on the adoration of the masses. Without it, I'll wither up and die."

"I told you, I'll just fawn over you myself!"

"I don't want that, either!"

"Why not?"

The heat from my hands was starting to melt the ice pack. "You're the exception. I don't want your adoration."

"No arguing with that, I guess." He traced a finger over my lips and whispered, "Next time you cheat on me, you're getting a German suplex."

"Are you trying to kill me?!" *Because tonight you almost succeeded!*

"That reminds me... You had some wild ideas about what my *punishment* was going to be, didn't you? You sick freak."

"Well, excuse me for not anticipating your little pro wrestling debut!"

"Okay, but exhibitionism? Really? That's a hard no from me." He pulled me down onto the bed with him and grinned. "I'd never let anyone else sneak a peek." Then he tossed my melted ice pack to the floor and pressed my chilly palm to his cheek. "I was miserable the whole way here. I couldn't leave until I finished my work, and I was an hour behind schedule... None of this is your fault, to be clear."

"Sorry." Somehow it was easier to apologize when I knew he wasn't blaming me. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay. I understand."

He had demanded that I apologize to Tatsuki, and yet he didn't seem to need one for himself. We helped each other out of our clothes, and when I felt his skin against mine, a soft spark of electricity shot through my entire body.

"Aah..."

For a long moment he simply held me. The tip of his nose brushed against my ear, and I could feel its residual chill from the air outside. *This is 100 percent, I thought to myself. This is everything. This is all there is. If I ever feel like it's not enough, it's because I've lost sight of something. It's all right here.*

"I love you," I told him for the first time. "And not just half—I love you all the way."

"I know," he replied quietly, nuzzling his face against mine like a small animal.

Meanwhile, our heartbeats steadily quickened in time with each other. The two of us were perfectly content in our desire for one another, and that made me happier than anything. Wrapped up in each other's arms, we kissed with our eyes closed, shutting out all the rest of the world. As we took turns savoring each other's tongues and teeth, I felt a sweet yearning rise up inside me like smoke.

"Aah...!"

His kisses traced a line down my neck to my collarbone, then to my left nipple. When he sucked it, my heart tightened as though his suction was reeling it in.

"Mm...mmm!"

As his tongue spun little circles around its edges, I felt it swell up like a little red button, with my lust boiling just beneath the surface of the skin. Then he grazed his teeth against it, and I felt a warmth start to build behind my belly button.

"Nnn...aaahh...!"

By the time he arrived at my pelvis, my member was already glistening with fluid. It twitched as his breath brushed against it.

"Aah, no!"

The moment he put it in his mouth, my cock swelled and a piercing pleasure wracked my senses, as though he had condensed all of my lust into a single solid mass.

“Aah! Aaahh...aah...!”

As the strength drained from my limbs, it brought the residual ache in my loins into sharp relief—my body was already begging for more. Then Ushio reached over to grab the lube I kept in the drawer of my headboard, and the sight alone was enough to make another part of me twinge in anticipation.

“Turn around.”

“Huh?”

“Because I’m having trouble being patient.”

He rolled my numb, post-orgasmal body over onto my stomach and propped my lower half up on my knees. I tried to spread my legs to distribute my weight more evenly, but he squeezed them back together and dribbled lotion down the crack of my ass.

“Aaahh...”

First my body shivered at the sudden chill. Then he slid his cock between my legs, and goosebumps pricked up my arms in a pleasant tingle.

“Tense your legs.”

“Aah...aah!”

His engorged member rubbed against my inner thighs, teasing my groin. I clung to the bedsheets with both hands, doing my best to endure his motions.

“Gah...aah...aaahh...!”

As he fucked this makeshift orifice, he plunged a finger into my lubricated ass, all the way in to the knuckle, and began to stroke me from the inside.

“Aah! Aah...gah...oh god...”

As fireworks exploded in my brain, my hips reflexively jerked away from his touch, but he yanked me back with his free hand and added a second finger with the other.

“Aaahh!”

“Hold still, damn it.”

His rock-hard length continued to slam against me; meanwhile, his ministrations made my rectum squelch loudly.

“Stop that!”

“You sure? You seem like you like it.”

“Aah...!”

He slid his fingers in to the knuckle and worked them back and forth ever so slightly. Sure enough, I could feel my walls clamping down around him.

“You’re begging for it so bad,” Ushio groaned. “I wanna put my cock in you right this minute and fuck you until I cum. You’re so hot, it’s pissing me off!”

His unsteady voice and accelerating thrusts conveyed his passion in painstaking detail; his vulgar bedroom talk was laced with deep desperation.

“Aaahh...!”

He yanked his fingers back out of me. Then he grabbed my hips and held them in place while he thrust his length against me repeatedly. My rectum twitched in time with his movements; the jostling made my nipples rub against the sheets. Soon my cock was painfully erect once more.

“Aah...aah!”

“Nngh...!”

Then I felt his semen spurt all over the underside of my manhood, and his warmth pulled away, leaving my thighs cold and empty. But then, not a moment later—“Aah!”—he pressed his wet tip against my perineum, nestling it in the narrow gap, and I knew he was getting hard again. Then he slid a finger in my ass again.

“No!” I pleaded. “No fingers!”

His teasing was excruciating now.

“What’s the matter?”

“I wanna have sex! Sex, sex, sex!”

“We *are* having sex.”

“You know what I mean!”

My body wanted *all* of Ushio; this was not that. I had only just regained my composure, and now my eyes were damp with desire all over again.



“Dumbo,” he whispered, stroking my back. “I was trying to hold back since you’re still a little tight, but...your funeral, I guess. Spread your legs.”

At his command, I gladly obeyed. I wasn’t afraid of the pain—if anything, I was more afraid of the pleasure fading away for good.

“Aah...”

At last, he pressed the requested object against the requested location.

“Aaahh...aah...!”

My eyes were open, and yet my vision burned bright white. My entrance ached as it spread to its fullest limits...but I knew the pain would fade as soon as the widest part made it in.

“Aah! Aah! Aah! I’m gonna cum!”

“Hey! Don’t clamp down so tight!”

His hot cock buried itself inside me, forcibly spreading me wider as it went. As it rubbed against my prostate, pleasure bubbled up from inside my manhood and steadily dribbled out.

“Aaaahhh...!”

The rest of me was utterly exhausted, but my ass continued to revel in the pleasure. I could feel his veins pulsing right up against mine; his length was throbbing so violently, I half expected to hear it every time I opened my mouth.

“Ugh, I’m so screwed,” Ushio muttered through sharp breaths. “Now every time I see you on TV, I’ll think back to this.”

“Don’t! Just forget it, stupid!”

How can I sit in front of the camera with a straight face if I have to imagine you jacking off to all my broadcasts?

“You’re stupid if you think I can!”

As if to make his point, he jackhammered into me harder than ever. Jostled by his endless motions, I writhed and clamped down on his length.

“Aah! Nngh! Ushio! Ushio! Don’t stop!”

“Kei... Touch yourself...”

“Nngh...!”

As instructed, I stroked my manhood, still slick with his cum. With the steady stream of pleasure from the anal penetration, it stiffened even more readily than last time.

“Aaahh...gah...oh god...nngh!”

Likewise, the pleasure from my hand flowed back to my ass, and I clamped down on Ushio more intensely than ever before, engulfing him in my soft, sticky walls.

“Holy fuck,” Ushio groaned, his voice tinged with ecstasy. “I think I’m gonna lose it.”

“Aah! Aaahh! Aah! Cum in me! I’m gonna... I’m gonna...!”

It was my SOS, and Ushio responded by pounding me hard.

“I love you...!”

“Aaahh!”

Even when I closed my eyes, light flooded my vision. The instant I achieved climax, my hips floated up like they were disconnected from gravity...until the next moment when Ushio unloaded his thick seed in me, weighing me back down like an anchor.

Ushio told me he had to catch a flight back to America that evening. Apparently he’d left all his luggage behind and flown here with only the clothes on his back. As for his client, they weren’t demanding he return, per se, but his own sense of integrity wouldn’t let him skip out without finishing the job he agreed to do.

“Oh yeah?” *What a hypocrite. He wants me to quit my job for him, but he’d never quit his for me.* “What time’s your flight?” I asked, sounding bored.

“Around five.”

“Which airport? Haneda?”

“Narita.”

I did some quick mental calculations. If we left for the airport at three, I could see him off and make it back to the station in time for my show. Given my stellar track record, I could probably get away with being late if I gave them a plausible excuse, like “I’m not feeling well, so I’m going to stop by the clinic before I come in.”

Meanwhile, Ushio yawned, unaware of my little scheme. As badly as I wanted to brag about the date I was going to take him on, I held my tongue. After all, I wanted it to be a surprise.

Once I saw him off, I could find some deserted restroom and change into my Kunieda Kei clothes. Where would I store them, though? Maybe a coin-operated locker would do the trick...but which one?

All these little details were a hassle to iron out, and yet I found I wasn’t annoyed in the slightest. First, I’d need to get my ass moving; then we’d leave the house together; then we’d catch a train to the airport; then I’d stare up at the sky and zone out watching his plane take off. No part of this task list was remotely fun, and yet I was tickled pink.

So, was I doing this for me or for him?

The answer: both.



PAID IN FULL
(IN PLACE OF AN AFTERWORD)

THE NEWS STUDIO was on the fifteenth floor, but the dressing room was on the second. Approximately thirty minutes prior to each broadcast, we were obligated to head down and have our makeup applied.

“Oh, Kunieda-san! Are you going to the dressing room? I’ll come with.”

Ugh. I was hoping to be discreet, but unfortunately Tatsuki slid into my elevator.

“Were you just spamming the Close button?”

“Cram it.”

“You went to the doctor’s office today, right? Are you sick?”

“Cram it.”

“Did you talk things out with Tsuzuki-san?”

“Cram it.”

Three seconds of silence passed, and then Tatsuki muttered, “...Make-up sex?”

“CRAM IT!”

“Oh my god, you did! Good for you! I hear make-up sex is the best, actually.”

“I swear to god, I’m gonna kill you—”

Unfortunately, I was out of time; the elevator had arrived at the second floor. Hastily, I withdrew my hand from his neck and composed myself. The doors opened, revealing an employee standing just outside.

“Oh, hello there, Kunieda-san!”

“Hello,” I greeted warmly, tapping the Open button. Then I gestured for Tatsuki to step out. “After you.”

“Oh, thanks,” Tatsuki replied with a bright smile to rival my own. Then, once the hallway was confirmed to be empty, he added, “Y’know, at this rate, I think you’re gonna give me trust issues.”

I ignored him and headed into the dressing room.

“Good morning! I’m here for my makeup.”

“Oh, good morning! And I see you’ve brought a friend with you! Let’s start with you, Kunieda-san, since you’ll be on camera sooner.”

As I took my seat in front of the vanity, however, the makeup artist paused to stare curiously at my reflection.

“Is there something on my face? Goodness, I sure hope not.” *Take a picture—it’ll last longer*, I thought sarcastically as I pretended to get embarrassed.

“No, it’s just...your skin is flawless today!”

“Huh?”

Behind me, at the other vanity, I heard Tatsuki snicker.

“God, I’m soooo jealous! I almost don’t want to put foundation on you! Do you have a skincare routine?”

As if I’d tell you. It took all of my acting ability to manage a modest, “Not really.”

Tonight I was scheduled for another grueling performance as my more perfect half.

“YES, NO, OR MAYBE” is a nonsensical choice when you think about it, though I’m pretty sure I spent a great deal of my childhood making it. “What does ‘maybe’ even mean in these cases?” I hear you ask. Well, you see, now that I’m an adult, binary choices tend to lead to a lot of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situations, and sometimes I really wish I could stay somewhere in the middle. Of course, if someone else said the same to me, I’d tell them to pick a side. Go figure.

Takemiya-sensei’s artwork really captures my two main characters in this sort of “cute adult” style, and that gets a big YES from me. She’s truly skilled at crafting sweet, gentle male faces, like Ushio in the frontispiece. The way it pairs perfectly with Kei’s bashful expression as he struggles to hide his love—aaaah! She is my barista, and I am her loyal customer for all time. Thank you so much.



A HYPOTHETICAL THOUGHT EXERCISE
(BONUS SHORT STORY)

ONSCREEN, I was blathering away:

Tonight, we've invited legislators in their twenties and early thirties to speak with us here at the studio about their roles, representing a generation of young people who have lost faith in elections and the political system at large. Tonight's theme: "What would you do if you were Prime Minister?" These public statements will shape the future of our political climate for decades to come. Now then, let's take a look at their answers...

On the count of three, my prerecorded self held up a flipboard for the camera to see. On it were the same trite, uninspired policies you've heard hundreds of times—raise childcare subsidies for each additional child, incentivize IT venture companies to move to rural areas, set the retirement age to 70, blah blah blah.

"Uggghhh, this is so boring," I complained. Now that I was safely away from the studio, I could finally say it out loud. "There's no innovation here—no hook. It's just a matter of time before these people either vanish or start some kind of scandal for the journos to have a field day."

"Enlighten me, Kunieda-sensei. What would *you* do if you were Prime Minister?" Ushio asked me as he sat next to me on the bed, watching the recording with me.

"I would make it illegal to refer to any adult woman as a 'girl.'"

"What...?"

"I'm saying this current trend of referring to grown women as 'girls' is freaking creepy! Imagine if we addressed adult men as 'boys'—it's demeaning as hell. Not only that, but now we have a whole show called 'Lady Girls' on TV? It's senseless! How old are they supposed to be? If you want to be 'ladies,' then act like it! Make up your mind!"

"What about phrases like 'girls' night out'?"

"Call it 'harpies' night' or something."

"And that's what you would do if you were the most powerful man in the country?"

“Yep.”

“Wow.” Ushio stared at me with a smile I could only describe as tepid. “Don’t quit your day job. They might actually vote for you, and that scares me.”

“Not interested in politics.” *It’s way more fun to talk out of my ass, obviously.*

“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to be PM either. If I were you, though...” He smirked. “I’d change careers and be a clown.”

“What the hell for?”

“Because you’re so good at it. What about you? What would you do if you were me?”

“Quit my job and be a house-husband,” I replied without missing a beat. “If I were you, I’d get on my hands and knees and worship me for deigning to date someone as lowly as you.”

“Oh yeah? What else?”

“I’d cook three meals a day, keep the bed tidy, prepare a heated towel after every bath, give massages at bedtime, do wake-up calls in the morning...”

“Right, right. So you want me to hold your hand and kiss you and stroke your hair and pat your back until you fall asleep? And cuddle with you on lazy Sunday mornings?”

“Yeah, exactly—what?! *No!*” I shot back on reflex, like a total comedian.

Ushio snorted. “If you want me to start doing these things, don’t be passive-aggressive. Just use your words and ask me to show you a little extra love.”

“I don’t need extra love, thank you very much!”

Ushio patted me on the cheek and his skin felt cool against mine...which meant my face was burning up.

“And for the record,” he said, “I’m pretty sure I’m already doing at least half of those things.”

“Liar! I mean...I don’t care!”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say. Okay, how about this...” He took the remote from my hands and turned off the TV.

“Hey!”

“To make it up to you, we can do a little brothel play tonight.”

Do prostitutes normally take your clothes off for you, or is that an extra charge?

“What’s your kink again? Me telling you I love you?”

“Go to hell!” But I didn’t tell him to stop.

Grinning, Ushio planted a kiss on my lips.



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